BEST practices

Connect Your Content with Your Audience—Using Wikis and Communities to Build Collaboration with Your Customers

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One of the biggest challenges for developing content is ensuring that you are giving the audience what it wants. Traditionally, information about how content is being used has come through several channels, including contacts with account teams and usability testing. Web 2.0 methods of collaboration, including wikis and online communities, are providing a more direct link to the audience for your content. Not only is the content more readily available than ever, but the users have the ability to provide information. With the growth of communities, members of the audience can connect with the content developers and each other at a deeper level.

GETTING INTIMATE WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

The evolution of content collaboration reflects efforts to get more in touch with the needs of the audience. When companies moved content from print to the web, content became much more accessible. The next generation of web technologies has allowed the audience to have a much greater impact on the content itself.
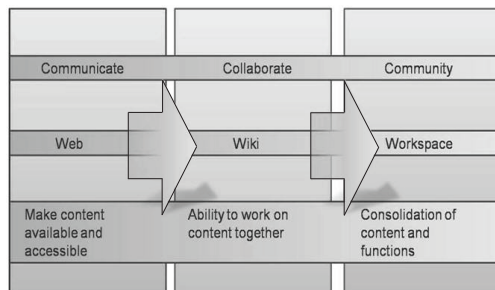
Web 2.0 technologies have provided new avenues to develop relationships with your audience. Many companies provide content on the web, and the term "to Google" something is now so ubiquitous that it has become part of the vocabulary. This availability of information has led to the next step in the evolution of content, where the audience can have a direct effect. Wikis allow readers to change and add content, bringing a whole new dynamic to content delivery. However, content collaboration is just one part of the connection to the customer. Increasingly, collaboration is becoming integral to many more aspects of the customer relationship.

> *"... authors transition from content developers to content stewards by facilitating the content development ..."*

Collaboration can also change the workflow within an organization. For content development and review, working collaboratively can bridge the communication gaps that often exist between organizations. Additionally, many companies have a global workforce, and using collaborative tools can help with communication between people in different geographic regions. As new delivery and interaction methods are developed, roles within the content development community will likely change as well. Instead of being solely responsible for content, authors transition from content developers to content stewards by facilitating the content development done by the community.

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By embracing collaborative content, companies can gain a better understanding of how products are used by different customers. In turn, those who contribute to the content can build a library that contains more relevant examples and situations. Connections can be built on a global scale to the people who actually use the products.

Of course, not all content is appropriate for collaboration. Customers expect some content to be static and official. This kind of content might be needed for several reasons, including legal, contractual, or regulatory requirements. An understanding of your customers' needs must be developed to determine which areas might be good candidates for collaboration. In the world of computer networking, much of the collaborative focus has been on topics such as configuration examples, troubleshooting, and software deployment. These are dynamic areas that can benefit from the wisdom of the crowds.

A Closer Look at Collaboration

Collaboration comes in many flavors. The option that will work best for one audience might not be the right one for another audience.

Even a very low level of collaboration can help build a community with your customers. Many companies use discussion forums as a way to address questions from their customers, and the forums also allow fellow customers to add their feedback. Some companies post content and allow readers to add comments and insights. This level provides some insight to the use of a product and any issues surrounding it, but falls short of being able to leverage the knowledge of the crowds.

Wikis allow readers to update and add content, which is where true collaboration begins. Contributors can add to a body of work, building upon the original seeding of content. The information repository can grow and evolve with its audience.

As more communities are built around products and content, a broader community-based workspace can evolve, with integrated content collaboration, discussion threads, news threads, and sometimes social networking. These communities are often built around the contributors so as to honor the expertise of the contributors. In this case, the focus moves from the content to the community.

Getting to a Collaborative Model

The most crucial decision when adopting a collaborative model is determining if your customers will use this type of environment. Maybe all of your customers will be interested in collaborating. Maybe only a small segment will participate. Maybe your customers want only content provided by the company. You need an understanding of your customers' needs and expected level of participation.

Next, you should look at your content and see what might be appropriate for collaboration. The "fork-lift" approach is not effective, where all content is moved to this new environment. Highly collaborative content types might include best practices or troubleshooting. Sometimes business decisions can also affect which content might be posted for collaboration. If a company decides not to maintain some content, it might post it to a collaborative space and allow the community to maintain it. In making these decisions, organizations must look at copyrights, warranties, intellectual property rights, and other considerations for sharing content.

In a successful collaborative environment, resources are key. One might think that a company could post its content to a collaborative space and then just let the community maintain it. However, even Wikipedia has a dedicated group of moderators and content owners. Within a company, program management is needed, and dedicated resources are needed for support. Content needs to be moderated, the system needs to be maintained, and the community, both inside and outside the company, needs to be engaged in building the environment. Without the people, the community is nothing.

> *"Of course, not all content is appropriate for collaboration."*

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As a result, it is critical to reach out, both inside and outside the company, to potential community participants. Some might be excited about this new methodology, and others might be resistant. However, they need to know about the community before they can use it, so this communication is key to success.

When one considers embarking on a new delivery methodology, there will be some effort needed to develop tools, organize the community, and break down the differences between organizations. In most cases, this new environment has people with new concepts and tools. Adapting to a new environment might have an initial impact on productivity, but as the team builds expertise, productivity should improve.

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Decisions also should be made on the collaborative platform. In some cases, a highly effective platform can be built inexpensively. Open-source tools are available and in wide use. However, companies might want to choose a proprietary platform in order to implement the new tools and environment quickly. The trade-off on cost and effort needs to be researched and planned.

IMPLEMENTATION SCENARIOS

The following scenarios show some of the considerations for implementing communities and wikis.

Scenario 1: You are a senior writer in a large company that produces software used by service providers and many large and small businesses for secure and reliable internet communication. Although you deliver all standard documentation with every release, you learn from your manager that customers still experience difficulties deploying the software into their production networks. Your manager asks you to find out what else the team can do to help customers deploy the products in a more timely fashion.

You begin to research the causes of deployment delays. What you discover is that many communication flows inside Engineering, Sales, Marketing, and Support departments often produce situations that make it virtually impossible for anyone to systematically discover and assess the potential impact of software upgrades in customer networks. To cut through these communication barriers, you recommend the use of a customer-focused eCommunity to facilitate communication both between the customer and your company, and within your organization. This communication pulls all the stakeholders together into one virtual place and is an efficient way to manage the product deployment process. Your manager is happy because you haven't diverted your time to writing additional documentation but you have helped solve a critical information and communication problem that directly impacts product deployment.

Scenario 2: The size of your team has been cut by 50 percent over the last two years. You have five senior writers left but three more high profile projects than you did two years ago. You have worked with your team to streamline the documentation you deliver so that nothing is printed anymore and only the very basic documents are delivered on your company's web page as HTML and PDFs. You have been asked to produce troubleshooting documentation to help customers solve problems themselves instead of calling the technical support team, whose size has also been cut.

This is a use case for a customer-facing and crowd-sourced documentation wiki.

THE BENEFITS OF COLLABORATION

With a well-planned and properly resourced collaboration program, you can start to realize some benefits from opening up your content to

your audience. You are giving your customers a bigger stake in your product, which can lead to greater loyalty. Your content will benefit from the knowledge of your audience because it can change and add to it to create a more robust library. Also, this interaction can help capture global perspectives on your product, such as use cases or best practices in different locales.

Using these newer technologies can lead to benefits outside of the audience interaction. With new technologies come new opportunities, where connection to communities or social networks can be implemented and leveraged. A new user experience is created out of this environment.

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A New Mindset

As you move into a collaborative model, a new mindset is needed. For many, this mindset is outside of their normal areas of expertise. Documents in a collaborative space must be viewed as living content. The content might not be developed using the conventional methodology, and it has a life past publishing. However, all content is not appropriate for collaboration, so both traditional and new models of content delivery must be able to coexist.

People are crucial in the effort to build a collaborative environment. Collaboration "champions" are necessary, people who believe that this new model can reach out to the

audience in ways that are not possible using old methods. Also, people are the key for building out the community by moderating, developing tools, and participating.

Collaboration and new methods of delivering content will not end with wikis and online communities. The evolution to online communities is just beginning. As video becomes more ubiquitous, more people will be looking for content in this medium. The ability to create your own content will be expected, not just nice-to-have. Readers will expect the content to reach them through content aggregators or personalization. These changes in content delivery and management create new roles for content developers, allowing them to facilitate the creation and management of content, and provide new insights into how people use content.

Collaborative tools have enabled a more interactive relationship with the content owners and audience. To be successful in a collaborative environment, the type of content must be considered, resources need to be engaged, and an ongoing commitment to facilitating and maintaining the environment must be adopted. Using this environment can help solve business problems and encourage a better rapport with the audience. As this relationship evolves, the content and the roles of the content developers and the audience will change.