



KICKING AND SCREAMING: Modernizing Today's Help Systems

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It's wake-up time. The customers of large software companies are demanding more and more from their help systems: in-depth tutorials; working, large-scale samples; and significant industry-specific content. Traditional application help systems are simply not up to the job. In fact, when people who use major software products need this type of next-generation help, they're probably more likely to turn to the Internet than to the application's own help menu.

The writers aren't to blame. Writing comprehensive documentation for today's applications is time- and resource-intensive enough without tackling additional demands for in-depth, real-world scenarios. Doing so requires writers to develop significant technical breadth and depth in issues that are complicated and ever-changing—while trying to anticipate how users will approach a product and where they will need assistance most. Because anticipating these needs is challenging, and because usage patterns are always evolving, writers often find themselves one step behind their readers.

After a product is released, the documentation picture becomes even bleaker. In theory, early feedback from sales and marketing could drive new content creation, addressing common pitfalls and revealing best practices. But because traditional documentation is packaged with the product, it sometimes lags behind major code updates and fixes. This means that new and improved content is delivered only with major functional updates—which are infrequently produced and not universally applied.

Breaking Free from the Box

The reason people turn to the Internet to answer their software questions is that it is a very powerful help system. Unlike traditional, in-the-box help systems, the Internet holds the promise of collaborative content; by its very nature, information on the Internet clusters around common user problems and their solutions. User communities form organically around products, whether a company creates those communities or not. Companies that don't play an active role in

the online community squander a priceless opportunity. These communities not only build customer loyalty, but are also an invaluable source of content and ideas—ideas that are developed for free by the people who best understand how your products work in the real world.

Imagine splitting your help system in two. Traditional help topics around concepts, tasks, and functionality would continue to form the bedrock of your product's user assistance. Complementing this assistance would be an online resource—such as a wiki—around which your user community can congregate. This site would augment the technical information packaged with the product by providing in-depth tutorials, case studies, and industry-specific samples and templates. Imagine: Things are already better for your end users because moving the content to the Internet gives them access to the Internet's unparalleled search capabilities. Things are better for you as well, because this online content can now be updated in real time to suit the changing needs of your users.

Things really come together when the product ships. Users start finding their way to the online documentation and begin interacting with it. Unlike with traditional help, you can see the order in which users are reading pages, and your writers can identify popular content and perhaps unanticipated paths. Because the site is live and supports modification, your writers can tailor the content to make these paths clearer and more accessible.

Some proprietary systems can report documentation usage, but it is unlikely their functionality will compete with the broad array of Web usage tools available. In any event, companies that continue to rely on such tools keep their users locked into using old help systems without the benefits of the Internet's expanding and maturing capabilities.

Online presence also allows your users to make direct contributions through a variety of collaboration tools, such as the *Dogear* social bookmarking technology implemented by IBM. Furthermore, the discussion tools that your site offers enable your writers and users to interact, which leads to further updates and

elaboration—all of which generates user assistance that is guaranteed to be on target.

A deliberate side effect of this collaborative online space is that your users find each other. This results in extremely valuable communication and reinforces the online resource's value to the user community.

Easier Said than Done

Changing your help system will require work. Product developers will need to re-examine their help system code (which often doesn't get much development attention) to determine how to integrate Web-based content seamlessly into their users' experience. There is also the potentially thorny question of how your users can access this content when they are disconnected. You can address this scenario by using a mechanism that caches a recent copy of the help system whenever possible, or that maintains a local copy of the help content and periodically updates it. Regardless of how you handle this situation, it is precisely the type of well-defined, interesting problem for which various technological solutions will doubtless emerge when the demand exists.


To be fair, online collaboration is really pretty terrifying for companies. Take the example of a wiki. How do you validate the accuracy of outside contributions? How do you manage vandalism? How do you maintain copyright and ownership of your documentation system? And how do you change the popular perception that wiki content is amateurish and incomplete?

These problems aren't new, however, and most of them have reasonable, time-tested answers. Any collaborative environment has degrees of participation, so a company can always restrict or reject modification from the outside. Ultimately, open collaboration (with intelligent oversight) produces a high-quality product, but it's understandable that a company would want to take this transition slowly.

If you think you may find yourself in this situation, take heart: Even complex issues like globalization have found solutions within collaborative communi-

ties such as Wikipedia, which has large article bases in over fifty languages.

Help 2.0

Thus far, we've studiously avoided talking about Web 2.0. The discussion around Web 2.0 concepts has become so all-consuming lately that cynicism is developing, and Web 2.0 is in danger of being dismissed as a passing fad. However, the trend toward richer interaction between content consumers and content providers is not a fad; it is a real and positive change. Think of the impact that modern concepts like tagging could have on a user's ability to find and categorize help information meaningfully. Think about finding ways to allow collaborative editing between writers and users before a product even ships. Imagine ways in which subscription and syndication could help keep your users informed of hot issues. This article is a call to arms for information producers: Push your organizations toward a modernized help environment. Drag them if you have to. 

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