Socially Enabled Information Structure: Understanding the Help 2.0 Revolution

by Scott Abel

Information Architecture

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

Traditional help files are passé, failing to serve customer needs and lagging behind the shift toward Web 2.0 interaction. Help 2.0 moves beyond repurposed static documents to integrate current strategies and capabilities for a more complete, engaging and satisfying customer experience. The approach features the interaction of an online support community with collaboration and feedback opportunities. Support sites based on the 2.0 model can provide membership access, user generated content, incentives for contributing and personalization options. They can also contribute to search engine optimization. Content analytics reveal member, group and site metrics – business critical data that can drive sales and revenue. Help 2.0 provides information for current and prospective customers, building a community, enhancing satisfaction and proving the effectiveness of exceptional support.

KEYWORDS

information architecture	user satisfaction
help systems	social networking
Web 2.0	customers

Scott Abel is a content management strategist and author of the popular business blog, TheContentWrangler.com, an online resource for content professionals with an interest in content management, content standards and content technologies. Scott also manages the social networking activities for several software and professional services firms in the high technology and digital mobile publishing sector. He can be reached at ScottAbel<at>me.com.

nformation professionals can benefit from watching the changes in the technical communication industry. Content specialists who have often aligned themselves with labels such as "technical writer" and "technical communicator" have moved from authoring content on typewriters to personal computers, from creating printed documentation to developing digital files and from authoring content in proprietary formats to creating content that adheres to open, international standards.

We've learned new approaches, adopted lessons learned from other disciplines and discovered the secret to creating multiple deliverables from a single source of content. We've challenged ourselves to reduce the jargon, to standardize terminology, to reuse content – to componentize, optimize and personalize it.

We've made all these changes, and yet, despite our best efforts, we often fail to meet customer needs. An example? Developing help systems. We're stuck creating Help 1.0 style content in a Help 2.0 world. And, that has got to change.

Old School Support: Help 1.0

When we started our well-intentioned move from providing users with paper-based documentation to providing them with electronic access to technical support content, we used the web as just another channel: Help 1.0. We populated websites with digital copies of printed documentation – downloadable, keyword-searchable PDF files. We often became adept at repurposing content – pushing it to other digital formats such as DVDs and in-house help systems. While these were all steps in the right direction, repurposing content in this manner is no longer an acceptable support solution.

Socially Enabled Support: Help 2.0

Think of Help 2.0 (not to be confused with Microsoft Help 2.0 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_Help_2) as the next generation of customer support. It encompasses all of the learning we've acquired since the advent of Help 1.0, and it leverages new techniques, devices and approaches – many of which did not exist a few years ago.

Help 2.0 is about creating experiences that meet (even exceed) customer expectations. Did you catch that? It's not just about creating support content; it's about creating support experiences your customers will find useful. It's about making the right information, in the right language, in the right format, available to the right people, at the right time. And it also means making that content accessible to those who need it, on the device they prefer, in ways that they find beneficial (whether our psychic power predicted such needs or not).

Help 2.0 is about letting go of old school, preconceived notions about our role as content providers. Help 2.0 forces us to realize that by leveraging the knowledge of the crowd we can help users find the right information quickly and easily, whether we created the content ourselves or not. And, perhaps most importantly, Help 2.0 is about creating support experiences in which users can help us learn what they want and need, while also allowing them to assist one another, in ways that are meaningful to them.

Characteristics of Socially Enabled, Help 2.0 Support Sites

Socially enabled Help 2.0 support sites differ from traditional online help sites in several significant ways:

- **Online communities** – Help 2.0 support sites are more accurately described as socially enabled online support communities – social help centers for product support information. Members can log in, create profiles (or leverage their existing social network profiles), ask questions, post information, search for content and help others. Member behavior can be tracked and those who accomplish certain tasks (help others, correct errors, create original content) can be rewarded with points that can be exchanged for digital candy: things like badges (http://mashable.com/2010/06/08/foursquare-badge-reward/), special privileges or free products and services.

- **Hubs for collaboration** – Help 2.0 support sites provide content creators with a collaborative authoring (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaborative_writing) environment that enables the co-authoring of content. Technical writers, editors and in some situations, customers, can work together to create, edit and publish content within a web browser without the need for desktop authoring tools.

- **Rich feedback collection vehicles** – Help 2.0 support sites provide your customers with an easy way to provide feedback (http://mashable.com/2010/02/21/deal-with-negative-feedback/). Errors, omissions, and confusing content can be pointed out by your customers, or by your support staff, so that improvements can be made quickly.

- **Sources of business-critical metrics** – Help 2.0 support sites are designed to collect, process and present actionable social insight analytics to those who need them. Help 2.0 sites include a control panel that allows managers to access reports that can tell them how well their content is doing (how many people have viewed a help topic, rated it favorably or not, printed it, emailed it, commented on it, edited it, shared it with others). Help 2.0 sites also provide managers with data about the actions of both official content contributors (employees) and community members.

- **Great search engine optimization assistants** – Help 2.0 support sites allow support center managers to optimize their sites for search engines. Site search log reports tell you which keywords your customers use to search for answers, not the keywords your marketing team "divines" with the help of a crystal ball and a thesaurus. The words consumers use to search for assistance on your site are likely to be the same terms they use when searching Google.

- **Revenue and sales drivers** – Help 2.0 support sites not only help reduce support costs by streamlining the content creation process through collaboration and by allowing members to help one another, but, when implemented well, they also present a positive image of your brand and engender trust in your competency as providers of a positive customer support experience.

Features of Socially Enabled, Help 2.0 Support Sites

Socially enabled Help 2.0 support sites offer features including the following:

- **Collaborative authoring** – Help 2.0 support sites provide browser-based authoring environments that work similarly to commonly used authoring tools (Microsoft Word, wikis). Various levels of authoring, editing and publishing privileges can be granted to employees (based on their role and job responsibilities), as well as to community members (based on the frequency with which they participate, helpfulness ratings or other criteria).

- **Membership** – Help 2.0 support sites are social help centers that provide members with product/service support through a community model. Members can access both official support center content and public content created by other members and/or repurposed from third-party information sources. Access to content is based on membership level.

- **User-generated content** – Help 2.0 support sites are social help centers that often support creating and publishing user-generated content. Members are often encouraged to create and submit original articles, videos, tips and tricks and to edit existing content already on the site. They're also encouraged both to spot (and share) links to content found outside the site and to share content found on the site externally via social networks. And they are allowed to rate content (no matter who provided it), ask questions of other members and answer questions submitted by others.

- **Content personalization** – Help 2.0 sites marry user-behavior information (keyword searches, downloads, purchases, contributions to the support site) with social profile data from third-party sources (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, FourSquare, YouTube) using an iTunes-like "genius search" to orchestrate a content-rich support experience. Content from third-party sources – tweets, blog posts, event information, news articles, how-to videos, user-generated content and location-specific data – can be aggregated together with company-created support content to provide an all-encompassing view of the information available on a particular topic, regardless of where it exists, personalized to the interest areas of a specific user.

- **Social Incentives** – Help 2.0 support sites provide individual community members with the ability to earn expanded content contribution privileges, enhanced access to content reserved for members who participate and access to special events, early product release programs, even free products and services.

- **Content curation** – Help 2.0 support sites take advantage of content syndication standards like Really Simple Syndication (RSS), allowing members to easily customize their support experience by adding feeds of information from sources (magazines, blogs, discussion forums, video channels) they find relevant and useful.

- **Content analytics** – Help 2.0 support sites integrate critical measurement data (analytics) into many aspects of the site. The site keeps track of data of importance to community management and members alike. Help 2.0 sites report personal analytics (metrics about the member), group analytics (metrics about groups of members) and site analytics (metrics associated with the site). Drilling down into these analytics reports can provide community managers with actionable data they can use immediately to address bugs, correct errors, spot problems, detect trends and assign resources.

Help 2.0 and Return on Investment

Far too often management considers providing technical documentation and customer support materials a necessary evil. The cost of developing these materials is viewed as a negative – part of the cost of doing business.

But that view is outdated and only considers the expenses associated with the creation and delivery of user assistance content. It fails to take into account the positive impact of providing prospective and current customers with an exceedingly good customer support experience. Providing great support experiences not only satisfies current customers, but it's a magnet for new customers, many of whom rely on recommendations from friends to

help them determine which products to consider purchasing. The better your customer support experiences are, the more likely it is that your customers will evangelize your brand and tell others about your outstanding support.

In a recent survey (http://bit.ly/eANmt8), 72% of consumers say customer service influences their decision to buy a product or service. There is also a body of anecdotal information indicating a direct correlation between pre-sales exposure to high quality support experiences and increases in sales. And, as many as 80% of consumers surveyed say recommendations, ratings and product reviews from friends – even virtual friends, fans and followers on social networks – affect their decision to purchase products and services.

If you sell products or services, here's your take-away: Customers are checking out your support sites and online documentation, as well as what others are saying about your offerings. What they learn will affect their decisions, whether they purchase your products/services or not.

"Online product and services documentation has proven to be an immensely effective way to increase new customer acquisition and to shorten sales cycles. It is now a critical business tool which is driving top-line revenue, decreasing support costs and increasing customer satisfaction," said Aaron Fulkerson, MindTouch CEO, in an article for Forbes.com [1].

Fulkerson also says that some companies "are reporting that their documentation is bringing in over 50% of their qualified leads." In his own company, Fulkerson reports, "70% plus of our site traffic is from organic sources, and our documentation generates more than half of our overall site traffic. Furthermore, over half of our lead generation is driven by our documentation."

The Help 2.0 Revolution: What's In It for You?

Information professionals, certainly those with an understanding of technical communication challenges, are well positioned to take the lead in the Help 2.0 revolution. But to do so, we need to focus on our primary directive – helping people accomplish their goals. Doing so means realizing that old school approaches of managing content no longer suffice. It may mean we cannot document everything as we would prefer. It means listening to our customers – working with them to improve the content services we provide. It also means we must depend on more than psychic power to create exceptional user experiences.

Embrace this change. Creating support communities that can provide meaningful metrics about our content and those who use it help us link our content creation and customer support efforts directly to sales. These connections will help upper management see the value of our contributions as content creators, curators and community leaders. ■

Resources Mentioned in the Article

[1] Fulkerson, A. (2010, August 9). The evolution of user manuals. *Forbes.com.* Retrieved July 12, 2011, from http://bit.ly/cq10rZ.