The Evolution of Online Help

Part I: Social Media, Open Architecture & Mobile

Online help is in need of evolution. The Internet is the primary source for end users to view help documentation, yet online help generated by traditional help authoring tools (HATs) does not leverage the inherent benefits of the Internet's open architecture, integrate with social media channels or provide sufficient handling on Internet-ready mobile devices. The original architects of the help documentation paradigm were not privy to the agile, social, browser-based construct in which digital life is now conducted. Continuing to maintain the status quo in HATs and resulting online help documentation will limit the influence of today's technical communicators. Online help documentation must advance and adapt alongside the Internet in order to remain relevant and truly meet the needs of a new generation of end users.

Social Media

The Internet has evolved from a collection of databases and brochure pages to fast-paced digital human interactions that have created a second universe for both business and personal users. It is dominated by websites and forums where users share opinions with one another on any variety of topics. Savvy businesses are capitalizing on the basic human need for communication and engagement. The functionality to easily comment upon, share or rate a point of interest is producing a long tail effect, giving content virtual legs that take it to previously unknown communities. "Virality", even on a small scale, helps to create conversation and community around even the most mundane topics.

As a result of this trend, users now demand that content is a two –sided conversation. It has become a basic tenet of the Internet experience to be able to easily share experiences with your network. Industries and companies that remain closed lip will find it increasingly difficult to engage today's prospects and customers. Technical

communication is an example of an industry that is too slowly executing on the need to give the end user a voice.

Help documentation is traditionally created behind a company firewall, most commonly developed by technical communicators and other qualified groups within the company. Once content is published to traditional online help systems using standard HATs there is little opportunity for the end user to provide feedback or comments to the company or other users. The company has missed a valuable opportunity to allow end users or subject matter experts (SME) to create rich conversations and community surrounding their product or service.

Disqus, Facebook, & Twitter

Social networking services such as Twitter, Facebook and Disqus have emerged in the past decade and revolutionized the Internet, as well as nearly all forms of commerce. Facebook currently has over five hundred million users, 50% of which are logging in every day. Business professionals and personal users alike utilize these services on a daily basis to keep connected with friends and business contacts, share information and communicate with other users. It is very rare in 2011 to find a person who is not familiar with at least a few various social networking mediums. Open APIs and simple plugins make using these services simple when using a browser-based help system that supports open collaboration.

Creating an internal feedback loop for your users can be a difficult task for technical communicators, but it is essential to building excellent documentation. Various points of view and feedback from end users and subject matter experts can prompt internal responses and updates to future versions of help content or even the product itself.

By integrating your help documentation with social networking mediums organizations can allow their end users to easily interact with their documentation every day. This ability to have a steady flow of updated help content (even in the form of Disqus comments, Facebook Likes or Twitter Tweets) will ensure that the product or service being sold appears credible, with up-to-date sources of information and an engaged user base.

Open Architecture

The rise of standards and open collaboration architecture practices fueled by public and private entities such as the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and companies like Google, have allowed software companies in every industry to take advantage of the Internet's speed, scale and flexibility.

Online help documentation (once only published to printed documents, behind wikis requiring sign-in or other legacy systems) is easier than ever for users to access. However, new best practices have emerged for allowing end users to more easily find the information they seek in online documentation. Next generation HATs and publishing platforms are designed to integrate with Google applications and other

credible APIs that create better products and experiences for the technical communicator and end user.

## Google Site Search & Google Analytics

Replacing client-side search implementations with best of breed tools like Google Site Search (used by 72% of US internet users (source: Google Zeitgeist) can eliminate load delays and decrease the response time required to bring users to specific topics. Doing so requires a HAT or publishing platform that can integrate with tools like Google Site Search.

At the same time, new integrations are possible that allow technical communicators and their teams to better monitor the usage of their documentation. Integrating Google Analytics or other analytics engines into online help documentation can offer the ability to track unique URLS created using topic names or unique file naming rules, offering concrete evidence of trouble spots or points of interests for user communities.

The integration of the best tools and functionality available for the end user and the technical communicator is imperative to producing exceptional documentation.

See Open Architecture Integration Example below

Open Architecture Integration Example: Google Search and WebWorks Reverb Help
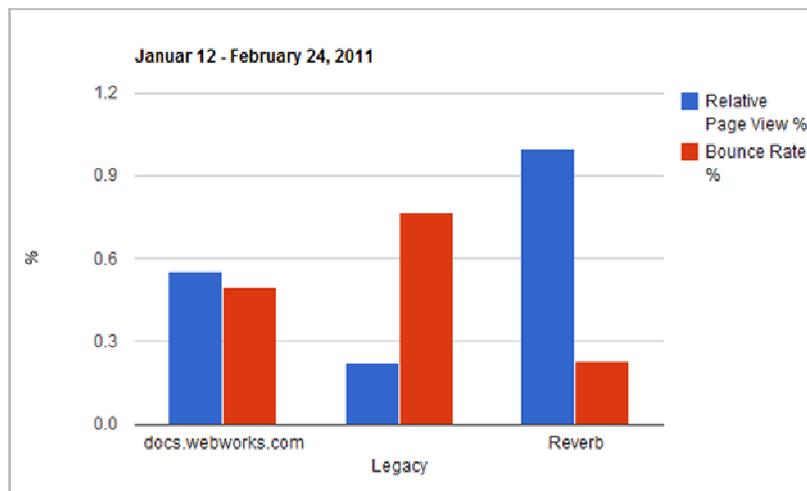
Impact graph showing online help system deployed using WebWorks Reverb Help showing a nearly 100% increase in page views over company's Wiki documentation and nearly 400% increase over traditional online html help system over six week period. Reverb Help included Google Search integration and consideration for search engine performance, including page specific parameters.

Mobile Devices

Morgan Stanley Research estimates that based on current trends Internet accessed on mobile devices will overtake desktop Internet access by the year 2014. The Internet has jumped the rails as the typical experience for most users is in the palm of their hands.

With an increasing number of users regularly accessing the Internet on mobile devices, the need for help documentation publishing tools to be able to keep up with the trend is more important than ever. Should they fall short, help documents will be inaccessible to a large portion of their intended audience.

HATs must enable technical communicators to display their information accurately with advanced user interface modifications on a variety of tablet and mobile devices like the iPad, iPhone and Android.

Advanced user interfaces must take into consideration the need for improved touch screen navigation for end users as this is a major point of differentiation between mobile and desktop browsing. Help deployed via mobile phones or tablets requires improved handling for large table of contents, including miniature table of contents and superb navigation of topics in order to quickly get the user to the correct page and avoiding frustration.

Summary

- Today's online help documentation model is outdated and no longer able to keep up with the demands of the users in the new Internet era.

- Business and consumers acclimated to social media require a simple way to give feedback and share point of interests.

- Integrating social media channels like Disqus, Facebook or Twitter with online help documentation can provide a feedback loop to the company and an opportunity for external support community.

- Integration with open tools and applications such as Google Site Search and Google Analytics can be beneficial to the end user and the company.

- As more users surf the internet via mobile device or tablet, it is imperative that online help documentation be formatted properly to ensure a positive experience.