

Blogs and Wikis: Building Customer Connections

Greg Lloyd, President and co-founder

Traction Software, Inc

www.TractionSoftware.com



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Blogs get a lot of press when individual bloggers express their opinions on politics, news of the day, or anything that strikes their fancy and thousands of others quickly jump in to join the conversation. The Wikipedia project (www.Wikipedia.org) is a well publicized example of a project that uses wiki software to bring people from around the world together to collaboratively write, edit and correct an online encyclopedia of over four millions articles - and growing - without centralized control. One common question from business people is: "Can I use blogs and wiki's to keep in touch with my customers?" The short answer is yes. Here are some practical examples.

Customer Connection Patterns

When business people say "keep in touch with my customers" they often mean "keep my customers aware of what my company is doing, and keep them interested in my products and services." Many companies use a print or email newsletter to keep customers informed.

A corporate blog can serve the same purpose. Use blog software to create an easily updated web site that customers, partners, employees and prospects can read without an email subscription. You can use most blog software to create a group blog – with individual posts written by executives and employees throughout your organization – that reads less like a platform for one person's opinion. Most blogs automatically create a syndicated news feed (RSS or Atom news format) that people can use to get real time updates. Some blog software can also automatically send an email newsletter based on content that's added to the blog. Because a corporate blog is simple to create and maintain, this can be a good alternative to a traditional customer newsletter. A corporate blog is more visible to the world, more timely, and less expensive to produce. It can also be

more interesting to read if you remember that you're talking to the world – not a captive audience – and write accordingly.

This may be what your business is looking for. But this is only one customer communication pattern: one-way broadcast from company to customers and the world. You can create more valuable customer connections without a lot of additional effort.

Customers can talk to you!

Your customers may already be talking about your company – or you – on the Web. Do you think it would be helpful to find out what they're saying? Try typing the name of your company, your product (or your own name) in a blog search engine such as Google's Blog search (<http://blogsearch.google.com>), Technorati (www.technorati.com), or Feedster (www.feedster.com).

Did you find anyone who loves your company? Hates your company? There are two common results:

- 1) Yes! People out there love / hate - or at least talk about - my company or product or service. I'd like to thank / correct / encourage / sue them.

How do you talk back? Use your blog and link to what they say! Or post a helpful or encouraging comment on their blog with a link back to your blog if you have something relevant to add to the conversation. Talk to your lawyer if you want to sue them.

- 2) No. People don't seem to know or care that my company or product or service exists.

If you'd like people to start talking about you, a feature story the Wall Street Journal or rave reviews of your new product in the business press would probably help. Talk to your product and marketing teams – and then your PR firm.

You can also use your blog to write something interesting and open a public conversation on some aspect of your company, product or industry that people care about. The key words are "interesting" and "care".

It helps two-way communication to open your corporate or personal blog to incoming comments, but be aware that you'll either need to devote time to deleting irrelevant SPAM comments, or ask people to register and encourage responsible commenting. See GM's FastLane Blog in the Links sidebar for an example of a corporate group blog - with lively comments from people who care a lot about cars, the auto industry, or GM.

Don't expect miracles, and plan to spend time doing your own web research to find out who blogs well about your industry and your key competitors (use the blog search engines). You'll likely gain enough bottom-up market and competitive insights to make the effort worthwhile, and may open connections to potential partners, employees and industry analysts (professional or non professional) who you would never connect with in any other way.

Encourage your customers to work with you

The "blog" (or web log) model focuses on creating a shared journal of time ordered posts and comments to build a conversation over time; the "wiki" model focuses on enabling people to collaboratively create and edit a web site that grows a page at a time (see "What's a Blog? A Wiki?" in the Links sidebar).

The Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) project is the most famous example of a collaboratively created web site using the wiki model. Anyone can create a new page and anyone can edit an existing page – with a few exceptions.

Here are three principles that keep the Wikipedia from turning into an unreadable home for SPAM advertising or worse:

- 1) Wikipedia has a purpose and general policies that are intended to guide all contributors and editors, in brief: "Wikipedia is a neutral and unbiased compilation of previously written, verifiable facts."
- 2) Wikipedia has a diligent self-selected team of volunteer editors who constantly monitor changes to eliminate vandalism. Editors help grow and prune the Wikipedia in accordance with its general policies, which are themselves created by consensus achieved through editing pages which define those policies.
- 3) Although *almost* anyone can edit *almost* any page anonymously, some highly visible or controversial pages and administrative actions may be locked down to a degree, and IP addresses or login accounts used for persistent vandalism can be restricted or banned.

To work with customers on the public internet using the wiki model you want to consider the same principles: What's the shared purpose? Who would care? Who would contribute? What policies can help make the project grow and evolve into something useful and interesting while discouraging misuse?

Here are two wiki customer connection examples to consider:

Create a wiki for an event or conference: It's easy to stand up a wiki that contains FAQ's about the event, then open up pages on topics of interest and sessions. The wiki provides an augmented record of what's planned or discussed

- including resources added after the event. See the 2007 Special Libraries Association Conference wiki in the Links sidebar for an example.

Create a wiki for a your product: In 2006 Motorola created a public wiki for its "Q" phone (www.motoqwiki.com). Motorola seeded the site with information from the in-box user guide, then opened up the wiki for customers to add their own support tips and notes. As of June 2007 the site has about a thousand registered editors – free registration is required to edit – about 60 main pages and 18 talk pages.

A more common use of product wiki's is for planning, documentation and support of open source software products. The wiki holds the human readable documentation set, and a source code control system holds the corresponding code and resources for the product. SourceForge (<http://sourceforge.net>) is the world's largest open source software development site hosting over 100,000 projects with over 1,000,000 registered users.

The SourceForge product development model sounds interesting – but what if your business isn't limited to creating open source software?

The answer can be simple – apply the same principles for blog and wiki style collaboration to how your business works *behind* your firewall – and let customers, suppliers, resellers and partners selectively join your internal product development, sales and support teams.

Enterprise 2.0 – Collaboration at the edge

Andrew McAfee coined the term "Enterprise 2.0" to refer to Web search, linking, authoring, tags, extensions and signals (blogs, wikis and more) within the enterprise. "Within the enterprise" is sometimes read as "for exclusive use by employees behind a corporate firewall" – which I believe is a mistake.

Sramana Mitra blogs about design collaboration within the extended enterprise – including customers and suppliers and linking to the content of computer aided design (CAD) systems rather than just software code repositories. When Boeing builds a new aircraft like the 787, the design, manufacturing, maintenance and operating procedures involve collaboration with major subcontractors, engine manufacturers, part suppliers, airlines, maintenance providers and regulatory authorities around the world – the extended enterprise.

On a scale that meaningful for almost every business, John Hagel and John Seely Brown write about the 'edge' of the enterprise as a location where interactions with customers, technology suppliers, manufacturers and sales channels take place. That's where I believe uniquely valuable customer and other connections can be created and maintained. Some connections are public – some are private.

Browser based blog and wiki technology with secure collaboration (passwords or identity certificates, encryption, and permissioned access) can be simply and safely deployed at the 'edge' of the enterprise. Collaboration at the edge provides internal and external stakeholders access to spaces that can be used freely for products development and other conversations - including those invisible to the general public - while keeping the environment behind the firewall private and secure.

Greg Lloyd (grl@TractionSoftware.com) is President and co-founder of Traction Software Inc (www.TractionSoftware.com), creators of Traction TeamPage - a blog and wiki product designed for secure, scalable, web collaboration. Since graduating from Brown University in 1970, Greg has participated in the creation of four generations of hypertext systems for commercial, government and research use.

Links Sidebar

What's a Blog? A Wiki – Jordan Frank Feb 27, 2007

<http://traction.tractionsoftware.com/traction/permalink/Blog372>

GM FastLane Blog – Group blog with comments

<http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>

Wikipedia: Five Pillars – A summary of Wikipedia policies and guidelines

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars

2007 Special Libraries Association – A conference wiki

http://lib.colostate.edu/publicwiki/index.php?title=Special_Libraries_Association

Motorola Q – Customer written product wiki for Motorola's "Q" phone

<http://www.motoqwiki.com>

Andrew McAfee, Harvard Business School Blog – Enterprise 2.0 expert

<http://blog.hbs.edu/faculty/amcafee/>

Design Collaboration in the extended enterprise? Sramana Mitra Feb 27, 2007

<http://sramanamitra.com/blog/615>

Can Your Firm Develop a Sustainable Edge? Ask John Hagel and John Seely Brown – Knowledge@Wharton June 5, 2005

<http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1220>

Enterprise 2.0: Letting Hypertext out of its box Greg Lloyd Apr 24, 2007

<http://traction.tractionsoftware.com/traction/permalink/Blog384>