

5 Effective Wiki Uses

and How Companies Benefit From Them

By Stewart Mader

Wikipedia came onto the scene in 2001 and quickly demonstrated how powerful and far-reaching collaborative content can be. Since then, wikis have proven to be valuable tools for many websites. Yet, few companies are using them to their full potential.

Here are five examples of how your business can benefit from using wikis:

Project Management

A wiki is ideal for project management because it provides a central hub to:

- Organize everything in one place so people can see an entire project.
- Streamline workflow and reduce reliance on email and documents that can easily get lost and confused with older versions.
- Inform everyone about the progress of the project, so people don't have to worry about whether it is on schedule.
- Involve everyone. This speeds up the overall process because it's easier to incorporate feedback in-the-flow instead of after the fact.

Carbon Five, a company that develops enterprise Web applications, uses a wiki for project management. According to Founder and CEO Don Thompson, "Each client gets their own 'space,' an area where they can collaborate on projects with the team at Carbon Five."

Customer/Client Collaboration

Red Ant, a Sydney, Australia based Web design and development firm, uses a wiki as the main collaboration hub for employees and customers. I asked Ben Still, managing director, how they use wikis: "First, a designer makes a page, attaches an image, and they're done with their part. But then I might look at it and realize that it needs a bit more explanation, or a link to a wireframe diagram to give context. One of our developers might have also mocked up how a menu works, and so they stick in a link to that. Our client might email the link around, and then add some comments on the page. This kind of collaborative workflow is one of our strengths, and it is really important for us to be able to add these various types of content easily."

Documentation

A wiki is ideal for building content to be used in product documentation, reports, whitepapers, and even books.

I wrote my latest book, *Wikipatterns*, using a wiki. To keep the content private, I gave only the editors and production staff at my publisher access to the wiki space. Throughout the process, the editors could see my progress on chapters, offer feedback as I finished the draft of each chapter, and easily export the finished content as XML for print production.

Online Community

The most successful wiki-based online communities focus on a specific topic, such as company's products. This singular focus ensures that the wiki's content will be scrutinized from every possible angle, yielding the best results. Remember that the whole purpose of a wiki is to invite community participation.

On the SAP Developer Network Wiki the Wiki FAQ says, "... [the] main criteria for choosing to put content in the wiki is its volatility and dynamics, extendability and/or collaborative character. Ask yourself [if] you want others to be able to change, extend, regroup, add [to] your contribution."

That's an excellent question to ask, especially for content that's going on a public wiki.

Policies, FAQ, Guidelines and Best Practices

A wiki can be especially useful for commonly needed information, like FAQ, guidelines, HR or purchasing policies. Editing permissions can be set so those responsible for these policies have the ability to edit them as needed and everyone else can read them. This eliminates the need to distribute paper copies of policies each time a change is made. Instead, the HR department can simply send an email announcing changes, with a link to the full policy page on the wiki.

These are just a few ways a wiki can be used and you'll soon discover that a wiki is one of the most versatile tools you can use. But what keeps people coming back is its simplicity. In a very short time, people can learn how to use the wiki and put any one of these examples into practice. Once they do so, they will wonder how they got along without it. ■



Interested in starting a wiki?

There are several options to choose from if you want to start your own wiki, some more sophisticated than others. If you want to get your feet wet, here are some popular choices:

MediaWiki

The single most popular open-source wiki available and the same one that powers Wikipedia. The familiar interface will be comfortable for users. <http://www.mediawiki.org>

TikiWiki

TikiWiki carries all of the functions of most wikis and includes support for blogs, forums and charts among some other features. <http://www.tikiwiki.org>

DokuWiki

A popular choice among small- and medium-sized business for its ease of use and implementation. Carries fewer features and is not as customizable as the other two choices. <http://www.dokuwiki.org>

Some other popular wikis include Confluence, PBwiki, PhpWiki and Wetpaint.

*Stewart Mader is a noted wiki consultant, author, and Evangelist for Atlassian, makers of the Confluence wiki. Visit his blog, *Grow Your Wiki* (www.ikiw.org), for more information on wiki uses, adoption tips, and his consulting services and workshops.*