Table of Contents

Introduction to Pre-publication Sample ............................................ v
Foreword – First Edition .................................................................... vii
Preface ............................................................................................ xiii
1. Towards the Future of Documentation ....................................... 1
   How people communicate about technical topics today ............. 2
   The changing roles of writers ..................................................... 8
   Defining conversation ............................................................... 10
   Agile development ................................................................... 12
   Why move content to the social web? ...................................... 13
   Social media, social networking, and now the social web ......... 15
2. Defining a Writer’s Role with the Social Web .............................. 17
   Challenges and opportunities .................................................. 18
   Building a strategy ................................................................... 22
   The documentation environment ............................................. 29
3. Community and Documentation ............................................. 39
   What is a community? ............................................................. 40
   Motivations for writers and online communities .................... 42
   Real-world events .................................................................... 49
   Book sprints ........................................................................... 54
4. Commenting and Connecting with Users ................................ 67
   Monitoring conversations ....................................................... 68
   Starting and maintaining a blog .............................................. 69
   Customer blog infrastructure .................................................. 74
   Integrating user content into user assistance ......................... 75
   Moderating or participating in online forums ......................... 86
   Instant messaging and responses .......................................... 86
   Writing reviews ...................................................................... 87
   Integrating social tagging ..................................................... 88
   Sharing photos and videos for explanation or assistance ........ 88
5. Wikis as Documentation Systems ........................................... 91
   Wikis for projects ................................................................. 92
   Starting or reinvigorating a wiki ............................................. 98
   Inheriting a large wiki .......................................................... 118
   Working in a wiki ................................................................. 120
   Wiki round tripping .............................................................. 129
   Single-sourcing and repurposing .......................................... 131
   Understanding wiki patterns and wiki structures ................... 132
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives when a wiki is not the right match</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with writers of wikis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki wrap up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Finding Your Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishing strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living and working with conversation and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Content Strategy for Community Documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen and monitor first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find the business goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and content audits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study: Community Content Strategy at Autodesk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Analyzing and Measuring Web Techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing community methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting into the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging grassroots efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring documentation as conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Open Source Documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open source, how does it work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open documentation community strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open source starting points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensing considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not about tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community content strategist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Concepts and Tools of the Social Web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New media content categories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social web techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning about social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Easter Seals Internet Public Discourse Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: A Case Study from Smart Content in the Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Content for Continuous Learning at Autodesk: When DITA Flows into a Social Web Platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thank you for downloading this pre-publication sample of the second edition of Anne Gentle's *Conversation and Community*. The second edition adds three new chapters, more than doubles the number of references, and updates the entire book.

This pre-publication sample contains the table of contents, preface, an excerpt from Chapter 4, *Commenting and Connecting with Users*, the bibliography, and the index.

**About XML Press**

XML Press (http://xmlpress.net) was founded in 2008 to publish content that helps technical communicators be more effective. Our publications support managers, social media practitioners, technical communicators, content strategists, and the engineers who support their efforts.

Our publications are available through most retailers, and discounted pricing is available for volume purchases for business, educational, or promotional use.

For more information, visit our website at http://xmlpress.net, send email to orders@xmlpress.net, or call us at (970) 231-3624.

Richard Hamilton
Publisher, XML Press
24 May 2012
This book grew out of my experimentation with open source, blogging, writing in a wiki for online help, connecting with community members, and a compulsion for writing things down. I was also prodded somehow by my complete adoration of Google search, which I felt would change forever the way that users find information that helps them complete a task, even one as simple as slicing a tomato\(^1\) or folding fitted sheets.\(^2\) Everyday tasks are documented on the web by everyday people. The start of this people-centric revolution has been described as the second generation of the Web. Web 1.0 was about data and display, but Web 2.0 merges data and display with user-centric design and ideas.

While people debate the cult of the amateur\(^{[16]}\) and spread uncertainty and doubt, professional writers now have the tools to collaborate with their audience easily for the first time in history. How we seize this opportunity and how our audience responds and becomes a part of this revolution will determine our success in this new environment.

Nearly all of the discussion in this book surrounds new ideas for documentation, whether you are writing documentation as film makers, corporate marketers, technical writers, programmers, or managers. Sometimes these “new” ideas uncover age-old truths about communities and people’s behavior and habits. Sometimes you have to experiment on your own time with your own dollars and tools to prove that a technique is worth an investment. That try-and-see attitude is what the cutting edge is all about.

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Beth Kanter, a trainer who teaches non-profit organizations how to bring social networking to their business, compares experiencing social media for the first time to a first-time sexual experience – you can’t describe how it feels until you experience it. In the same way, you can’t describe or measure the value of a technique or methodology until you try it and analyze your results.

Many people would argue, “how can you find the time?” and would describe social media dabbling and experimentation as a waste of time. Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* and *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*, offers a counter-argument pointing out that the 200 billion hours per year spent watching TV in the US pales in comparison with the 100 million hours spent to create Wikipedia (see “Cognitive Surplus Visualized” by David McCandless, for a visualization).

By finding and making the time for this experimental discovery, you may save time and effort and increase the quality and perceived value of your content. Plus, you may find interacting with others more fulfilling than the one-way communication offered by your television or other media outlets.

**What’s new in this edition**

In the three plus years that have passed since I completed the first edition, I have continued to learn from my experiences as a community leader, content strategist, technical writer, documentation automation and system analyst, and student of web analytics. I have also met people who have generously taught me and offered their lessons learned. In this edition, I have tried to include as many of their stories as possible through interviews.

I have added deep dives into my areas of interest: content strategy, web analytics, and open source documentation. And I have made
revisions based on input from some of the many university students
who have used this book as a text book.

What’s in this book

Use this book to help you experiment with social media, social net-
working, and social relevance, and to analyze and interpret your
results.

It offers descriptions and definitions for the technologies and pub-
lishing methods that make up this new way of thinking about con-
tent, and it provides ideas for defining your role as a content author
or provider. You will find planning and implementation suggestions
and advice as well as considerations for choosing your role and goals
as a writer or provider of content.

This book includes a chapter on measuring the effectiveness of these
new techniques and proving their value to various stakeholders.
And you will find specific ideas for integrating conversation, com-
munity, and collaboration into documentation.

In this book you will learn about enabling conversation and com-
munity in your documentation using social media and social net-
working. Our world is shifting, and the definition and scope of
documentation is moving along disruptive fault lines. Mark Baker
describes this in a recent blog entry:

"But on the web, something new is emerging:
communication that has the individuality and
personal touch of a conversation, but the per-
sistence and public availability of a publication.
—Mark Baker, “I am a content strategist”[43]
This book shares ways that we can manage this intersection of publication and conversation and work successfully with collaborators and their contributions.

What does it mean to enable a conversation, and how do you assess Web 2.0 tools and strategies such as wikis and blogs? In the landscape of technology products, the consumption of technical topics is often reduced to finding the right answer quickly, solving the problem, and moving on. End-users do not necessarily care about the source of the information or whether it was written by a professional; they judge the information solely on its ability to solve their problem.

So if you are a professional writer, how do you fit into a landscape in which content must be constantly available and up-to-date and where blog entries get more visitors than your help pages? How do you ensure that your content has the same or better value than content from a myriad of online sources?

If you are a developer who wants to ensure that users have a good experience and get the answers they need, how do you respond to questions naturally or even presciently? If you are a content creator, such as a filmmaker or game designer, how do you ensure that you are entering the conversation and enabling community in your communications?

To answer these questions, and to help writers determine which social networking tools might help them communicate technical information to their end-users, this book examines the categories of social media and networking tools and provides pointers for evaluating each newcomer or old standby.
Related information

In the spirit of free and open sharing, links to all of the websites mentioned in this book are collected on delicious.com.³ Participate in building this book’s future by adding new, relevant URLs on delicious.com using the tags conversation or community and adding me to your network.

About Anne Gentle

I currently work as the fanatical technical writer and community documentation coordinator at Rackspace for OpenStack, an open source cloud computing project. Prior to joining OpenStack, I worked as a community publishing consultant, providing strategic direction for professional writers who want to produce online content with wikis and user-generated articles and comments. I write a professional blog about writing, wikis, and information design at JustWriteClick.com.⁴

I became interested in using wikis for documentation and decided that a hands-on apprenticeship would be the most efficient way to learn about wikis. I have been volunteering for the One Laptop per Child project, writing end-user documentation for children, parents, and teachers across the world, using open source software that could change the way education happens in under-developed and underserved nations.

FLOSS Manuals, a toolset and community dedicated to writing free documentation for free software, shaped many of my experiences with community documentation. I have some history on the web

³ See http://del.icio.us/annegentle/conversation/ and http://del.icio.us/annegentle/-community/
⁴ http://JustWriteClick.com
now as I started blogging in 2005 for BMC Software. I would not have the amazing opportunity I have today to put into practice these ideas each and every day if it weren’t for the way this book has shaped my career path, my passions, and my love of community.

Acknowledgments

For a few years, I worked a 30-hour week, which allowed me to spend my time pursuing interesting projects and also work a longer “mom shift” in the afternoons and evenings. Without nap time, early bedtime routines for my kids, truly-caring child care, and above all, a wonderful husband, I never could have written this book, nor would I have learned the lessons that enabled me to write it.

I offer special thanks and gratitude to my husband Paul for encouraging me. His involvement in the distributed.net community brought us to Austin, Texas, and showed me the power of volunteers sharing a common cause.

My good friend Kelly Holcomb skillfully edited the initial drafts of the first edition of this book. She read it, edited it, and asked wise questions in the margins, which compelled me to answer them.

I owe a huge debt for the education I have received from FLOSS Manuals founder Adam Hyde and SugarLabs coordinator David Farning. They both read extremely early drafts of this book and encouraged me throughout the process. Adam generously contributed most of the content about Book Sprints. Working with him has been inspirational. He has assembled a great crew at FLOSS Manuals, which connected me with Patrick Davison, who did the interior and cover designs for the first edition, and whose illustrations are still part of the second edition. And without FLOSS Manuals I might

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5 http://talk.bmc.com
6 http://distributed.net
not have met Andy Oram, who graciously read the book, offered guidance, and wrote an insightful foreword for the first edition.

Thanks to “ThisParticularGreg,” and “J.E. Theriot,” “krossbow,” and “Pathfinder Linden” for their photographs and for making their photographs available on Flickr\(^7\) under a Creative Commons License. Thanks to “nolnet” for giving me permission to use photos of his Lego refrigerator.

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Thanks to Eve Smith and Easter Seals for giving me permission to reprint the Easter Seals Internet Public Discourse Policy in Appendix B. Thanks to Frank Gilbane and Outsell, Inc. for giving me permission to reprint the case study in Appendix C.

Scott Abel, Sarah O’Keefe, Alan Porter, and Will Sansbury read a hack of a draft and offered wonderful insights from their varied perspectives. I learned from each of them. Without their generous gift of knowledge, wisdom, experience, and time, this book would not be as useful as I hope it will be to you.

\(^7\) http://flickr.com
Commenting and Connecting with Users

The biggest mistake is believing there is one right way to listen, to talk, to have a conversation – or a relationship.

—Deborah Tannen

It was impossible to get a conversation going, everybody was talking too much.

—Yogi Berra
New social computing tools are being invented all the time, and traditional websites are also finding ways to incorporate tagging, sharing, and other collaboration helpers in their content. Blogs have led the way. Blogs, short for weblogs, are websites with reverse chronological entries (listing them from newest to oldest). Topics range from personal to professional, offering galleries of photography or comics, and can be written, audio, or video entries.

When blogging, realize first and foremost that a conversation doesn’t have to be a direct connection between writer and customer. You can blog about your area of expertise, which shows the customer your passion for your work, which translates into high quality products or services from you when representing your company on a blog. A blog entry provides an opportunity for a customer to connect to you.

Also, think about how you can help customers connect with each other in comments or in trackbacks, which notify the original blog author that you have linked to a particular entry.

However, blogging is not the only way to connect with customers or readers. You can use comment threads, online forums, Twitter, and other conversational tools. This section discusses ideas for starting conversations, building on the stages of listening, participating, and offering a platform.

Monitoring conversations

If you are a technical writer, you are probably a fast reader and collector of information, and therefore you would probably be an excellent blog monitor, able to easily handle multiple notifications from news feeds or RSS subscriptions. If you also maintain a blog and online presence, then commenting on other blogs in the field is a great way to join the conversation. Also consider joining or moderating a customer forum or board. If your product is sold on
a website like Amazon, you can find conversations going on in the reviews and review comments as well as blog entries.

**Reading and commenting on blogs**

I believe the best starting point for blogging is to read blogs. Follow the ones that interest you personally and professionally by using an RSS feed reader such as Bloglines or Google Reader. As you begin reading and collecting subscriptions to blogs, you will notice the discussions in the comments.

Once you feel confident and interested enough in a topic or post that you can contribute a comment, write your comment, and make that connection. If beginning even an internal-audience blog is intimidating, make your first foray into blogging commenting on other’s blogs. And, you certainly should read blogs often before beginning to write one yourself to get a sense of style, tone, and voice.

**Starting and maintaining a blog**

Starting a blog may seem overwhelming at first. Not only do you have to choose a tool and platform with which to start, you must also begin the daunting task of writing and maintaining regular posts. The authors of *Groundswell* say that a good measure of whether you have the stamina and energy to keep up with regular blogging is to try to write five entries. If you cannot sustain the writing effort for the time it takes to write five entries, you should reconsider starting a blog.

**Choosing a blogging platform**

When I started blogging, I was fortunate because the blogging tool had already been selected. All I had to do was get registered and start writing. I could also practice with the blogging interface itself, learning what I liked and disliked in a blogging engine. Because the engine choices were out of my hands in my early blog writing at-
tempts (the internal BMC blogs were maintained on a Sun blogging platform), I did not have the added pressure of evaluating tools.

When evaluating a blogging platform, think of the authoring requirements, but also consider the reading and consuming requirements and expectations that readers bring to a blog. Here are some basic considerations for blog authoring and maintenance:

- Hosting (self-install or hosted options)
- System requirements if self-hosting
- Storage needs
- Spam controls
- Categories or tags for retrieval and subscriptions
- Access control on individual posts
- Archiving
- Trackbacks
- Post authoring and editing
- Commenting and comment notification and moderation
- Workflow for approval and timed publishing
- Multiple author features
- Content import and export
- Syndication
- Templates
- Web analytics
- Themes and styling capabilities

If the blog platform is not already selected for you, compare blog platforms at weblogmatrix.org\(^1\) to assist in your selection process. You can filter based on many of the considerations listed above, including system requirements, features, and support options.

An important consideration for choosing a blog platform is the ability to connect to your audience using comments and to provide link notifications called trackbacks. Trackback notifications are sent

\(^1\) http://weblogmatrix.org
to a blogger when you link to his or her blog entry. They typically only work within the same blogging system. For example, WordPress blogs cannot notify Blogger blogs about a link to an entry.

Other important considerations include spam prevention and comment moderation. And, if you need to design a theme for the blog to match your company’s brand, consider how easy it is to modify the templates yourself.

The basic expectations that readers have for a blog are comments, subscriptions, and easy linking to individual entries. Without a subscription system, like an RSS or Atom feed, a website cannot be a blog.

**Frequency of posts**

When I first proposed starting a blog for BMC Software, my role was writing solutions documentation for combinations of products that solved specific business needs. My proposal was accepted immediately because of the type of customer we were trying to reach with our particular type of writing assignments. Blogging about my experiences while I learned about ITIL (the IT (Information Technology) Infrastructure Library) and Business Service Management would help others learn with me. This type of “learn with me” message is a good match for the blog medium.

Before writing the proposal, I asked a fellow technical writer – who I knew was a blogger with a decent following – how many posts a week would I need to promise in order to keep a set of readers? She said two a week at a minimum with three a week being ideal.

I wrote into the proposal that I would write a minimum of two posts a week, which would take about four hours or ten percent of my time. I kept that schedule up, aiming for a Tuesday and Thursday post, and was one of the more prolific bloggers on the site. A few
months after launching talk.bmc.com, they instituted a policy that you had to have at least one blog update every two months or your blog would be taken off the site. This type of requirement is a good idea for corporate sites that want committed bloggers and dynamic content.

My initial work in blogging was internal to BMC Software. This limited my potential readers, but it helped me focus my audience. I could practice my voice and write limited topics while finding what I liked about blogging and where the rewards might be so that I could justify the time and effort I was investing. I learned about post and commenting frequency, where comments came from, how to respond, and how to grow readership.

After getting comfortable with and learning from my internal blog experience, I next began blogging externally on the talk.bmc.com site, using the Plone engine already set up for us. Because comments were moderated by other BMC staffers, I did not have to worry about deleting spam or moderating comments; I could focus on researching and writing entries. If your company offers any blogging platform, I highly recommend that you use it as an experimental path for learning about blogging and determining if there is a return on investment (or “Reach and Influence”) equation that will work for your blogging efforts.

**Continuity of posts**

If you want to take a break from blogging but still want to have fresh blog posts on your site, you could write posts ahead of time and set them for a publish date in the future. If you can’t take the time to get that far ahead in publishing you can also ask for guest posts. This technique works well for planned extended leaves such as maternity leave or for avoiding burnout.

---

2 http://talk.bmc.com
3 http://talk.bmc.com
In my case, when I was out raising babies, I wanted the voice to be genuine and current, so I chose not to pre-write posts. Instead, in planning for my leave, I wrote to about twenty of my colleagues and asked each of them to write a blog entry about a specific topic, selecting topics that I knew were interesting to them or that they had written email messages about previously.

I managed to get about ten posts this way. I introduced each post with a short introduction to the guest blogger and a note to let the reader know that I was on an extended leave. The supportive talk.bmc.com⁴ team published them for me on a weekly schedule. This technique proved to be an effective bridge, and I did not lose readership while I was away.

Blog examples

**Atlassian Confluence: A technical writer’s blog**

Customers seeking technical support for a Confluence product have commented on Sarah Maddox’s blog shown in Figure 4.1. They know that she is a technical writer at Confluence, and they have come to expect a quicker response from her personal/professional blog than from other traditional channels. And sure enough, she delivers on their expectations.

![Figure 4.1. http://ffeathers.wordpress.com](http://ffeathers.wordpress.com)

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⁴ [http://talk.bmc.com](http://talk.bmc.com)
Tom Johnson has been blogging tirelessly for years now. While he doesn’t speak on behalf of his employer, he often draws from work experiences to engage his readers.

Figure 4.2. http://idratherbewriting.com

Customer blog infrastructure

In many organizations, the technical publication department will not take the lead in designing or providing infrastructure for customer blogs. This type of service is often better performed by the sales department, which can track generated leads more easily, the customer support department, which has a business goal of customers helping other customers, or by departments like website management or marketing. Sometimes a valuable internal communications device is started independently by someone using a server under a desk. For inspiration, read *Groundswell*[19] for case studies such as the Best Buy internal blog platform for employees.
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Symbols
90-9-1 rule, 113, 117

A
A List Apart, 148
Abel, Scott, 15, 92, 172
access control
wikis, 93, 95, 98
acquisition, 199
administrators, 81
Adobe, 20, 243
Google custom search engine, 8
Adobe Labs, 247
wiki, 141
Adwords, 21
aggregators, RSS, 240
Agile development, 12-13, 35-36
Agile manifesto, 13
AIML (Artificial Intelligence Markup Language), 87
Ajax patterns, wiki example, 247
Almond, Chris, 65
altruism, 40
Amazon.com
reviews, 69
social shopping, 87
analytics, web (see web analytics)
Anderson, Chris, 39
anti-patterns, 132
AOL Instant Messenger, 228
Apache, 142
Apache wiki, 247
license agreement, 108
arbitration rules, 100
architecture patterns, 132
Army of Awesome, Mozilla, 13
Artificial Intelligence Markup Language (AIML), 87
ASI, 160
astroturf, 188
asynchronous conversation, 11, 228
Atlassian, 106
blog, 73
Atom, 240
audience analysis, 30-32, 98, 121
audio, 157
accessing content through, 240
feeds, 240
tools, 228
audit, 169-171
Autodesk
Civil Engineering Community, 25
interview, 171-180
WikiHelp, 172
B
back up, 104
Bailie, Rahel, 185
Baker, Mark, xv
barcamp, 50
Barefoot, Darren, 21, 23
batch processing
wikis, 96
Bernoff, Josh, 24
Berra, Yogi, 67
beta, closed, 83
Blankenhorn, Dana, 205
blitz test, 110
blogging
choosing a platform, 69
getting started, 24
policy, 269
Reach and Influence, 184
style, 148
Bloglines, 69, 240–241
BlogPulse, 158
blogs, 68, 237
analyzing conversations in, 46
attitudes towards, 2
commenting on, 69
continuity, 72
customer, 74
Easter Seals, 269
examples, 4, 73
guest contributors, 72
infrastructure, 74
platforms, 74
policy, 72, 151
posting frequency, 71
professionalism in, 151
starting, 69
storytelling in, 152–153
subscriptions, 240
timing posts, 154
updates, 238
BlueBooks wiki, IBM, 130
BMC Software, xviii, 114, 150, 156–
157, 162, 238
boards, 255
book sprints, 11, 43, 49, 54–65
budget, 60
logistics, 57–60
planning, 54–57
remote participation, 61
Booki, 120, 208
bookmarking, social, 88, 229
boyd, danah, 16
brands
corporate, 71
in search, as a measure of blog in-
fluence, 185
personal, 152
preserving, 18
Stewart Mader, 162
BrightKite, 247
Brindley, Lana, 224
Bringhurst, Bob, 20, 243
Britannica (see Encyclopedia Britan-
nica)
budget
book sprints, 60
Bujold, Lois McMaster, 181
business case, 182
business goals, 168–169, 197
defining, 34
bystander, 20
C
calendars
RSS, 243
Campfire, 258
Captcha, 104
Carl, Steve, 157
Carroll, John, 4
certification program, 193
challenges
  social networking, 18
changes
  tracking, 106
Chappell, Gail, 26
chat widget, 62
chatbots, 87
chunking information, 11
Church, Cindy, 26
CIDM, 97
Cisco, 145
Clark, Brian, 154
closed beta, 83
clouds, tag, 229
Cluetrain Manifesto, 150
CodeGear, 135
collaboration
  authoring and, 51, 60
economy of, 45
encouraging, 112
IBM, 65
in-person, 40, 60
motivations for, 45
online textbooks, 101
social tagging and, 231
wikis and, 101
collaborative economy, 46
collectors, 80
commenting systems, 80
  requirements, 81
comments
  as a marketing metric, 189
  enabling, 28, 79
  expiration, 82
  integrating with documentation, 133
  moderation, 83
  on blog posts, 41
  processing, 84
  restrictions on, 82
  sharing, 81
user, 235
CommonCraft, 123
communities
  conversations in, 45, 255
  EMC, 26
  events, 49, 60
  examples of online, 26
  grassroots, 20
  growing, 48
  in-person interaction, 49
  measuring conversations in, 46
  motivations of, 44
  participation in, 44
  patterns, 49
  social bookmarking and, 87
  Sun Microsystems, 26
  trust within, 49
  understanding current, 19
  virtual, 40, 262
  writer’s role in, 44
communities of practice, 10, 43
community
  audit, 169-171
  authors, 109
  definition, 40-42
  fitting in, 186
  roles, 32
  strategy, IBM, 190
  wiki, 105
community building
  time commitment, 183
community documentation
  strategy, 168
community equity, 195
  framework, 196
community manager, 43
Community Roundtable, 167
community-generated content, 228, 234, 245
  compared with user-generated content, 267-268
Red Hat, 219
  types of, 223
crisis communications, 186
crowdsourcing, 131, 245
  Twitter, 251
CSS, 148
culture clash, developer vs. non-developer, 205
Cunningham, Ward, 245
Custom Content Assembler, IBM, 258
customers
  building relationships, 30
D
Dagenais, Barthélémy, 122
dapper.net, 25
Darwin Information Typing Architecture (see DITA)
definitions, searching for, 264
deletion
  wiki content, 119
delicious.com, 88, 159, 229, 231-232
demographics
  Facebook, 14
  Twitter, 14
digg.com, 88, 156, 189, 196, 229
Dim-dim, 258
disclaimers, 36
Discovery Education, 263
discussions
  content, 255
  in book sprints, 54
  tools, 228
  transparency of, 151
Disqus, 79, 83
DITA, 173, 249, 258
  Autodesk, 172
  InfoSlicer, 75
  map, 78
  roundtripping, 130
wikis, 131, 135
DITA2wiki, 77, 103, 193
doc blitz, 212
doc sprints, 109-110
  GNOME Foundation, 216
DocBook, 103, 212
  GNOME Foundation, 217
  Red Hat, 221
Doctorow, Cory, 257
Doctors Without Borders, 122
DocTrain conference, 21, 51
documentation
  compared with bicycling and basketball, 205
  FLOSS Manuals, 208
  free, 44
  instant messaging and, 13
  integrating wikis with, 102
  minimalist, 4
  open methods, 221
  open source, 204
  open source strategies, 207
  subscription-based change notification, 243
  testing, 110
  user expectations, 13
  wikis used for, 122
dogfooding, 111
dooce.com, 166
Dopplr, 248
Dreyfus, Hubert L., 44
Dreyfus, Stuart E., 44
Dyer, Lisa, 101, 171, 190
E
Easter Seals
  social computing policy, 33
Easter Seals Internet Public Discourse Policy, 269
ECHO, 79
economy
  collaborative, 46
editing, 123
  wiki, 128
efficiency, measuring, 169
Elling, Dee, 135, 244
email
  lists, 161, 255
    (see also mailing lists)
  notifications, 64, 83
  tools, 228
Embarcadero, 135, 244
emoticons, 256
enabler role, 22, 32
Encyclopedia Britannica, 7-8
engagement tactics, 167
entry point, 6
Erkalovic, Aleksandar, 61
events, 50
examples
  location aware applications, 248
  microblogging, 253
  profile, 254-255
  syndication, 243
  wiki, 247
existing content
  reusing, 57
expectations
  documentation, 6
expenses
  book sprints, 57-60
Feedburner, 240
feeds, aggregated, 161
Ferriss, Timothy, 4
filtering
  language, 243
  need for, 2
Firefox, 99
Flickr, 159, 229, 232, 260
FLOSS Manuals, xvii, 11, 101, 208-209
  book sprints, 54-65
  Booki tool, 120
  funding model, 208
  goals, 43
  remixing content, 259
folksonomy, 230
Forrester Research, 31, 40
forummatrix.org, 256
forums, 255, 257
  compared to wikis, 92
  moderating, 86
  online, 256
  support mechanism, 256
Foursquare, 229
Freenode, 63
Friedman, Thomas, 39
friendraising, 160
Friendster, 253

G
  geospatial awareness, 247
  geospatial tools, 229
GFDL (GNU Free Documentation License), 215
gift economy, 40
GigaSpaces, 105
Gilbane, 232
Github, 213
Glancee, 248
GNOME Foundation
  interview, 214
GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL), 215
GNU Public License, 78
goals, business, 168-169
going viral, 260
Google, 21
  AdWords, 158
  Alerts, 24, 79
  Analytics, 195, 202
  Calendar, 239
custom search engine, 8
define: command, 264
Feedburner, 240
Forms, 30, 79
Groups, 161
julice, 239
Plus, 162, 258
Reader, 69, 240, 242
search algorithms, 7
search engine form, 253
Spreadsheets, 30
Summer of Code, 120, 209
Wave, 266
web master help center, 156
webmaster guidelines, 7
Google+, 265
GoToMeeting, 258
Gowalla, 229
GPS
  used in web applications, 247
grassroots efforts, 182, 187
  community, 20
griefers, 262
Groundswell, 31
  four-step POST approach, 34
  groundswell, 187
Groundswell Social Technographics tool, 31
guide
  wiki how-to, 100
guidelines
  creating, 48
  mashup, 77
Gunderloy, Mike, 143
Gunner, Alan, 209
H
Haggard, Ragan, 144
Halavais, Alan, 47
Halvorson, Kristina, 166-167
Happe, Rachel, 245
happiness, pillars of, 46
haptic controllers, 230
hashtags
  Twitter, 250
help systems
  live, 86
  mashups in, 259
  wikis as, 97
hierarchy
  wiki, 118
Holiday Inn study, 171
Holland, Anne, 184
honesty
  importance in social media, 150
Howe, Jeff, 245
Huba, Jackie, 158
Huggins, Summer, 250
humor, 148
Hunt, Tara, 46-47, 257
Hurley, William (Whurley), 156, 196
Hyde, Adam, 11, 54, 61, 206, 208, 224
I
IBM, 166, 191
  Custom Content Assembler, 258
  interview, 190-194
RedBooks, 65
RedBooks and BlueBooks, 130
social computing policy, 33
terms of use for content, 193
Index

Identi.ca, 228, 249

identity
  commenting systems, 81
identity management, 81
idratherbewriting.com, 102
IgniteCAST, 88
IM (see instant messaging)
iMIS, 243
InCopy, 243
InDesign, 20, 243
influence
  investing in, 185
information chunking, 11
InfoSlicer, 75
infrastructure
  blogging, 74
instant messaging, 255
  clients, 256
  tools, 228
instigator
  role, 21
instigator role, 32
Instructables.com, 230
Intentional Design, 185
Intercom magazine, 135, 156
Internet Relay Chat (IRC), 12, 61, 256
interviews
  Autodesk, 171-180
  Brindley, Lana, 218-221
  customer, 160
  Dyer, Lisa, 190-194
  McCance, Shaun, 214-218
  OpenStack, 209-214
  Red Hat, 218-221
  Solano, Victor, 172-180
invitations to in-person events, 55
iPod, 240
IRC (Internet Relay Chat), 12, 61, 110, 228, 256
IRCza, 87
Israel, Shel, 40
iTunes, 240-241

J
Jaiku, 228, 249
Jing, 239
Jive Software, 79
job searches
  using RSS, 243
Johnson, Tom, 8, 74, 102, 157
Jones, Colleen, 171

K
K15t Software, 103
Kanter, Beth, xiii, 23, 183
key performance indicators, 192
keywords, 184
  tools, 158
  tracking, 195
Klein, SJ, 118
Klout, 169
Knoppix wiki, 247
Koestler, Arthur, 17
Kollock, Peter, 45
Kottke, Jason, 237
Krag, Tomas, 54

L
landing page, 6
language filtering, 243
Latitude, 247
LDS, blog, 74
Lego, 89
lessons learned, recording, 183
levels of conversation, 11
Li, Charlene, 24
libre, 203
license
  contributor agreement, 108
Index 313

Creative Commons, 25-26, 77, 108, 210, 215, 219
types of, 223
Open Publication, 219
licensing, 222-224
lifecycle
documentation, 29
LinkedIn, 229, 249, 254
data, 170
linking
inbound, 184
supplementary material, 157
wikis, 128
listening, 68
importance of, 168
Live Help links, 86
location awareness, 247
logistics
book sprints, 57-60
Lombardi Software, 101
long tail, 39
Lovett, John, 198

M
Maayan, Gilad David, 105
machinima, 258
Maddox, Sarah, 35, 73, 106, 250, 256
Mader, Stewart, 37, 49, 91-92, 132-133, 162
mailing lists, 161, 256
(see also email lists)
contributions to, 31, 44
problems with, 161
Mallard, 217
management buy-in, 182
Mangum, Ynema, 157, 196
Marketing Sherpa, 184
Marx, Groucho, 2
mashups, 75, 258-260
guidelines, 77
Maven, 213
McCance, Shaun
interview, 214-218
McCormack, Jay, 160
McGrane, Karen, 166
MediaWiki, 188
exporting from, 77
for OpenDS wiki, 144
medical applications, 121
meetings
online, 258
meetups, 50
metrics
effectiveness, 184
executive (CEO), 189
inbound links, 184
marketing, 189
RSS feed subscriptions, 184
search position, 184
traffic, blog, 184
voice, 185
microblogging, 228, 249
examples, 253
Microformats wiki, 247
Microsoft, 21
Developer Network (MSDN), 116, 143
guidelines for tone in communication, 149
online user assistance, 259
Miller, Harry, 13
MindTouch, 53, 172, 180, 202
minimalist documentation, 4, 148
model of skill acquisition, 44
moderation
blog comments, 72, 83
forum, 86
moderators, 80
MoinMoin, 212
monitoring conversations, 68
motivation, 42
Motorola Q wiki, 247
Movable Type, 239
Mozilla, 13
  interview, 51-53
Mozillazine
    Knowledge Base, 119, 247
MSDN, 116, 143
MWDumper, 76
Mylyn, 103
MySpace
  site, 253
  wikipattern, 119

N
Naymz, 253, 265
NetBeans Ruby, 27
New York Times, 1
newbies
  writing for, 150
news feeds, 68
Nielsen, Jakob, 113
90-9-1 rule, 113, 117
Ning, 161
Nintendo Wii, 230
notification, 83
Nurnberg Funnel, 4

O
objectives
  business, 34
Oestriech, Linda, 8
OLPC, 4, 99, 118
  author’s experience with, 42
  book sprints, 55
  collaboration, 60
  troubleshooting guide, 124
  user guide, 106
  wiki, 246-247
One Laptop per Child, xvii, 4 (see OLPC)
  online community, 269
  online help, 133
    evaluating, 134
  online identity
    personas, 36
    preserving, 103
  online meeting tools, 258
  open documentation, 221
  Open Help Conference, 214
  Open MRS, 121-122
  Open Publication license, 219
  open source, 203, 223
    Apache, 142
    documentation, 123
    open documentation contributions, 44
    user expectations, 34
    wikis for, 26
OpenDS, 144
OpenStack, xvii, 26, 121, 246
  documentation, 226
  interview, 209
  wiki, 212
Opera Browser wiki, 247
optimization
  search engine, 155-156
Oram, Andy, 21, 44, 115
Owyang, Jeremiah, 40
Oxford English Dictionary
  distributed development, 266

P
package tracking with RSS, 242
pain points
  audience, 30
Parish, Tom, 250
participation
  90-9-1 rule, 116
  rewards for, 115
  side effect, 114
participation inequality, 113
participatory media, 234
patterns
  wiki, 132
peer-to-peer support, 169
Pepple, Ken, 26
performance indicators, 192
personal equity, 196
personal information
  sharing, 152-153
personality, 20
personas, 80
  online, 36
  personal vs. professional, 36
Peterson, Eric, 197-198
phases
  content sharing, 25-26
  listening, 23-24
  participation, 24
  platform, 26-27
photos
  product, 159
  sharing, 88, 260
Picasa, 229
pillars of happiness, 46
pilot projects, 183
ping.fm, 249
planet blog, 161
planning
  book sprints, 54-57
  community integration, 22
platforms
  blogging, 74
Plaxo, 229
plugins
  Confluence, 111
podcasts, 237
  author’s experience with, 157
  customer, 160
Pogue, David, 251
policies
  arbitration, 101
  corporate, 18, 151
  participation, 72
  social computing
    Easter Seals, 269
    IBM, 33
Porter, Alan, 266
Pownce, 249
presence, online, 18
Priestley, Michael, 258
print-on-demand (POD), 3
processing comments, 84
product development
  agile, 35-36
profiles
  examples, 254-255
  online, 253
Publican, 221
publishing models, 235
publishing strategies, 154

Q
quilting, 3

R
Rackspace, xvii, 166
  interview, 209
reach and influence (R and I), 72
  ROI compared with, 184
read wear, 114
  indicators, 115
readers, 80
  acquiring, 199
Really Simple Syndication (see RSS)
RedBook, 193
RedBooks, IBM, 65, 130
reddit.com, 88
Redish, Ginny, 11, 149
Reiser, Peter, 196
relationship building, 182
release notes, 239
  wikis used for, 107
repurposing, 131
reputation systems, 115
response time, support, 169
retention, 199
return on investment (ROI), 19
  blogging, 72
  proving, 184
retweet (RT), 260
reviewers
  recruiting, 117
reviews
  writing, 87
rewards
  participation, 115
Rheingold, Howard, 41
Risk Of Inaction, 183
Robillard, Martin P., 122
rocketboom.com, 238
Rockley, Ann, 5, 165-166
roles
  community content strategist, 225
  enabler, 22, 32
  instigator, 21, 32
  personality types and, 22
  writer, 17, 20, 32, 43
round tripping
  wiki, 129-131
RSS, 68, 128, 229, 240-243
  aggregator, 240
  calendar, 243
  job search using, 243
  measuring reader loyalty, 184
  notifications, 83
  package tracking, 242
  podcasts, 240
  sharing content through, 28
Ruby
  NetBeans, 27

S
sage on stage, 20
Saleem, Muhammad, 148
sales
  metrics connected to, 185
sandbox
  wiki, 100
Scoble, Robert, 15, 40
Screencast.com, 88, 230
screencasting, 78, 159, 239
scripting, 128
Scrum, 35
search
  accessing documentation through, 28
  fragmented, 102
  in mashups, 258
  measure of blog effectiveness, 184
  optimization, 155-156
  rankings, 6-8, 184
  RSS and, 241
  wikis, 128
Second Life, 230, 262
Sedaris, David, 147
Self, Tony, 149
SEMRush, 158
SEO, 155-156
Sharpreader, 240
Shepperd, Eric, 51
Shirky, Clay, xiii, 43, 46, 161, 186
Sierra, Kathy, 4, 9, 48
signal-to-noise ratio, mailing lists, 161
simpletracker.com, 242
single-sourcing, 129, 131-132
skill acquisition, model, 44
Skype, 228
Slashdot, 196
Smartboard, 263
SMS, 230
  notifications, 83
SmugMug, 239
social bookmarking, 88, 156, 230
social coders, 81
social media
  audience analysis, 26, 147
  community involvement, 45
  defining, 14
  metrics, 189
  phases for implementing, 23
  style of writing, 148
  time commitment, 183
  tools, 227
social networking
  sites, 253
  tools, 227
social shopping, 87
Social Technographics ladder, 170
social weather, 46
social web, 15
  starting points, 162
Solano, Victor, 172
spam
  filtering, 82
  wiki, 104
Sphinx, 246
Spock, 253, 265
Spool, Jared, 9
SQL Lite wiki, 247
Stallman, Richard, 204
STC (Society for Technical Communication), 8
STC Intercom, 135, 156
STC Summit, 27, 197, 250
story telling, 121
strategies
  publishing, 154
  strategist, community content, 225
  stumbleupon.com, 88
style guides, 148
  wiki, 99
subscription tools, 24
Subversion, 221
Sugar, 42
SugarCRM Wiki, 247
SugarLabs, 55, 60, 75
  wiki, 247
Sun Microsystems, 99, 161
Sun.tv, 230
support
  crowd-sourced, 13
  forums as, 256
  peer-to-peer, 169
Survey Monkey, 30
surveys, 30
Swartz, Aaron, 116
Swipe File, 154
Swisher, Janet, 51, 60, 121
SXSWi, 250
syndicated content, 229
  examples, 243
Szabo, Julie, 23

tag clouds, 114, 229, 231
tagging, 230-234
  Flickr, 260
  social, 88, 156
talk.bmc.com, 238
talk.bmc.comsite, 150, 157
Tannen, Deborah, 67
taxonomy, 229-230
team
  identifying key members, 36
Tech Writer Voices, 8
technical communication, 9
  Web 2.0 and, 190
technical documentation
  analyzing audiences, 30
  benefiting from conversation, 13
  collaborative authoring, 54, 60, 65
  expectations for, 13
levels of availability on the social web, 29
open source, 203
titles, 153
wikis and, 91
technical writer blog, 74
Technorati, 24, 158, 240
templates, 115
Tenney, A. A., 47
testing, 37
text messaging, 230
time
allocating, 183
estimating, 183
titles, 153
tooling, lack of, 205
tools
evaluating, 265-266
open source, 224
wikis and user assistance, 76
trackbacks, 70
trademarks, 149
traffic, 184
training, 44, 262
wikis, 99
translation, 207
GNOME Foundation, 217
transparency
importance of, 151
Trapani, Gina, 266
TripIt, 248
Tumblr, 228, 249
TurboTax, 252
Twain, Mark, 222
TweetLater.com, 154
tweetup, 48
TWiki, 208
Twinkle, 247
Twitter, 162, 228, 249
character limit, 249
crowdsourcing, 251
demographics, 14
hashtags, 250
Pogue, David and, 251
release notes using, 250
RSS search feed, 243
timing tweets, 154
tweetups, 50
user growth rate, 13
wikis and, 112
typos
deliberate, 100

Ubuntu documentation wiki, 247
unconferences, 50
update frequency, impact on search, 7-8
user assistance, 75
feedback systems, 79
search ranking, 8
user comments, 235
user stories, 12
user-generated content, 234, 245
compared with community-generated content, 267
leveraging, 186

Vandalism, wiki, 104
VanFossen, Lorelle, 155
Vernon, Amy, 207
Viddler, 159
video, 159, 230
downloading through feeds, 242
log, 238
sharing, 28, 88, 260
tagging, 230
Vimeo, 159, 230
virtual communities, 41
virtual reality, 262
visitors
  acquiring and retaining, 198
  Facebook, 255
vlog, 238
VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol), 61

W
Wales, Jimbo, 116
warranted content, 101
Web 2.0, 190
  fit with Agile development, 12
web analytics, 83, 181-202
  business goals tied to, 198
  performance reviews, 197
  weaknesses, 201
web applications
  travel, 248
web content strategy, 167
Web Worker Daily, 21
WebEx, 258
weblogs (see blogs)
Webworks, 100, 103
Weinberg, Gerald, 49
Wells Fargo, 166
Wethington, Mike, 36
whuffie, 257
Whuffie Factor, The, 46
Whurley, 156, 196
Wii, 230
wikihow.com, 236
wikimatrix.org, 125
wikipatterns, 132
  MySpace, 119
Wikipedia, 14, 116
  page rank vs. Britannica, 7
wikis, 245
  access control, 93, 95
  advantages, 97
  alternatives, 133
batch processing, 96
categories, maintaining, 105
derchange tracking, 106
collaboration, 37, 92, 112
comparisons, 125
connectivity, 93
content management and, 95
content, importance of original, 103
crowdsourcing, 131
deleting content, 119
differences from user assistance, 97
disadvantages, 93
documentation, 122, 224
editing, 123
enterprise, 92
evaluating, 127
examples, 141, 247
exporting content, 76
external vs. internal, 97
help systems, 97
hierarchy, 118
integrating with, 102
managing large, 118
measuring effectiveness, 184
offline access, 96
patterns, 49
portability, 93
release notes, 107
roles, 119
round tripping, 96, 129-131
scripting, 128
search, 95
software, 125
spam, 104
starting, 98
style guides, 99
training, 99
vandalism, 104
workflow, 95
wikis, examples
Adobe Labs, 142, 247
Ajax patterns, 247
Apache, 142, 247
Cisco, 145
Confluence, 247
Knoppix, 247
Microformats, 247
Motorola Q, 247
Mozilla Knowledge Base, 247
OLPC, 247
OpenDS, 144
Opera Browser, 247
SQL Lite, 247
SugarCRM, 247
SugarLabs, 247
Ubuntu documentation, 247
wikiHow, 236
wikislice, 75, 103
wikitext, 96, 128
Wired magazine, 40, 245
wordle.net, 232
WordPress, 163
Wordpress.tv, 230, 267
World of Warcraft wiki, 236
wowwiki.com, 236
writerriver.com, 88
writers
agile methodology and, 35
roles, 43
volunteer vs. professional, 207
writing for the web, 11
Wurman, Richard Saul, 1

X
XML, 171

Y
Yahoo, 256
Yahoo Developer Network, 257
Yahoo Groups, 242
Yahoo Instant Messenger, 228
Yahoo Pipes, 158
YouTube, 159, 230, 260

Z
ZDNet, 205
Zelenka, Anne, 21