

Conversation and Community

The Social Web for Documentation

2nd Edition

Pre-publication Sample: TOC and Excerpt

Anne Gentle

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Conversation and Community

The Social Web for Documentation

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Introduction to Pre-publication Sample

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
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Preface

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 tomato¹ 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.

¹ http://www.ehow.com/how_1682_slice-tomato.html

² http://www.ehow.com/how_6067_fold-fitted-sheet.html

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*[31] and *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*[32], 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”[69], 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 networking, and social relevance, and to analyze and interpret your results.

It offers descriptions and definitions for the technologies and publishing methods that make up this new way of thinking about content, 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, community, and collaboration into documentation.

In this book you will learn about enabling conversation and community in your documentation using social media and social networking. 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 persistence 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 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 under-served 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.⁵ 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.net⁶ 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

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 Flickr⁷ under a Creative Commons License. Thanks to “nolnet” for giving me permission to use photos of his Lego refrigerator.

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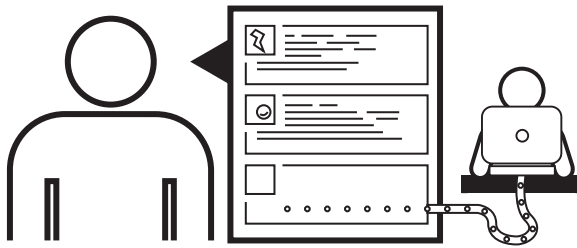
Thanks to Eve Smith and Easter Seals for giving me permission to reprint the Easter Seals Internet Public Discourse Policy in Appendix B. Thanks to Frank Gilbane and Outsell, Inc. for giving me permission to reprint the case study in Appendix C.

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>

4

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*[19] 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.org¹ 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,² 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.com³ 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.

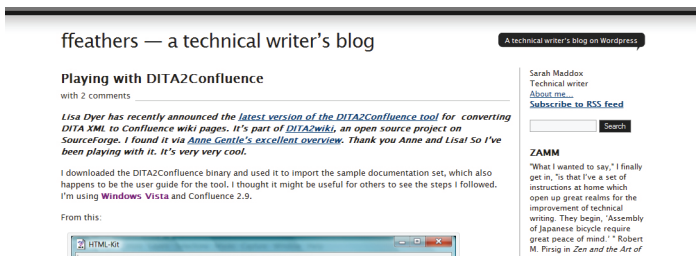


Figure 4.1. <http://ffeatures.wordpress.com>

⁴ <http://talk.bmc.com>

I'd Rather Be Writing

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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