

The Communication Revolution: Why We Are All Technical
Communicators in a Web 2.0 World

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, technical communication involved a trained individual creating manuals, pamphlets, and other documents. It was one person broadcasting content to many end-users. Whether it was instruction booklets or college application forms, one person was in charge of content creation and that person was deemed an expert. One person. One way.

Fast forward to the 21st century. Things have changed. Everyone is now a technical communicator. As Dorothy would say, “We’re not in Kansas anymore.”

What caused such a dramatic shift in communication? The answer is the development of Web 2.0, an Internet-based movement centered on building relationships and connecting people. Individuals no longer want to go through life disconnected and disengaged. People desire to express their opinions, give feedback, and think for themselves. It’s no longer a corporate world. It’s a you-and-me world. Corporations no longer control the content that is distributed to the masses. (Argenti, 2006) We are now the content producers.

A lot of people are scared and unsure as to how to function in a Web 2.0 society. Stepping out, learning something new, and breaking the mold is tough but it needs to be done. What do you need to know to make the most of the Web 2.0 movement? How can you be successful in a world where you’re in the driver’s seat?

It’s easier than you think.

What Is Web 2.0? How Did We Get Here?

When the Internet gained popularity at the close of the 20th century, it became one of the primary sources of information gathering. Companies, universities, and special interest groups began to post a plethora of content online for everyone to view. This model of information consumption followed the typical rules of society – the corporation produced the information and the knowledge-seeker, or everyday worker, consumed it. No one bothered to challenge the status quo. It was a big game of follow the leader.

However, things changed in the early 2000s when online journaling became popular. With online journals, users could sign up for a website and post their thoughts, concerns, and air their frustrations. The main limitation with online journals was that a user could only share text-based content. This problem was answered with the development of blogs, a more robust way of broadcasting your life. Blogs allowed users to document their lives using words, photos, music, and videos. With a blog, nearly all things were possible.

Although blogs made content creation easier, it did not develop the relationships people felt they were missing. Thus, social networking was born. Social networking websites, such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, were developed to connect people real-time, much like face-to-face communication. Humans have a desire to know anything and everything and social networking websites allow users to get the latest scoop from the comfort of their couch. Does it get much easier?

This revolutionary development of human relationships, from online journals to Twitter, has given each person the power to voice his or her opinion and connect with others. This is Web 2.0. (Web 2.0 Survival Guide, 2010)

What's The Point?

Coming from a world where information was strictly read-only, people may wonder what all the fuss is over Web 2.0. It would be great if this were just another fad, like Furbies or fanny packs. But it isn't.

The shift to a Web 2.0 culture has given the individual a voice. In a world where the average person is feeling more oppressed each day, individuals want to speak up and others want to hear what they have to say. Facebook is one of the largest online forums for conversation, dotting a membership list of over 100 million people. If Facebook were a country, it would be the fourth largest. (Qualman, 2009) Individuals are no longer consumers of information; they are now content producers. (Ramamurthy, 2010) *You* are now a content producer.

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In addition to giving the common man or woman a voice, Web 2.0 has allowed users to share and collaborate information without bounds. A person no longer needs to use email to update his or her family. Instead, they can simply create a blog or Twitter account and share text, music, pictures, and videos instantly. This up-to-the-minute mindset allows for users to feel involved in the lives of others and to engage in conversations that would not normally take place face-to-face or via email.

In a Web 2.0 world, John Doe is not just the man next door. He is the man next door who runs a blog, has 456 friends on Facebook, 1,398 Twitter followers, and occasionally posts YouTube videos. John Doe produces content and has a voice. He is connected and connections are what make the world go 'round. It's time to embrace Web 2.0.

What's In It For Me?

A fair number of people tend not to do something unless they are rewarded in some way. They want to get compensated for their efforts or at least get a small token of appreciation. Unfortunately, Facebook and Twitter don't hand out rewards to their subscribers simply for using their service. Although nothing tangible is given, there are still a few reasons why embracing the Web 2.0 culture isn't such a bad thing.

1. Get connected.

Fact: In 2008, 1-in-8 married couples met via social networking websites. (Qualman, 2009)

Every human since the dawn of time has yearned to be part of a group and to connect with others. Connections create communities. Hoffman notes, "A community, whether virtual or real, is defined by the relationships that exist between its members." (5, 2007) The components of Web 2.0—blogs, Facebook, iTunes, news feeds—are quick and easy ways to connect with others. (Barbaro, 2008) The world isn't slowing down and it's becoming tougher to create and maintain relationships. Stay in touch using Web 2.0.

2. Break loose.

Fact: There are approximately 37,500 new blog posts written each hour (or 10.4 posts per second) (LIS Education 2.0 Project, 2009)

Web 2.0 allows for a person to break loose from typical day-to-day activities and move into a different, and exciting, culture. A person's day no longer needs to consist of simply going to work, sitting in traffic, and grabbing McDonalds for dinner. With the resources of Web 2.0, he or she can write about something interesting, read and respond to thoughtful

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articles, and participate in online videoconferences – all before bedtime. Break the mold. It's easy.

3. Stay up-to-date.

Fact: Between 2:15pm and 3:15pm on June 25, 2009, the day of Michael Jackson's death, CNN.com received over 20 million pageviews. (CNN)

Sharing information has never been so easy. Most blogs display an icon that allows a person to share content with their friends on Facebook and Twitter. Since content is constantly being recycled and passed on, information consumption is on the rise. Breaking news spreads rapidly and social networking sites are often the first to report critical pieces of information. Web 2.0 is a metropolis of data. Embrace it.

4. Become valuable.

Fact: Approximately 80% of companies use LinkedIn as a primary recruiting tool for new jobs. (Qualman, 2009)

Web 2.0 isn't only for the people; it's for corporations, too. Companies have realized that social networking websites would be a great place to raise brand awareness and sales. Although many companies want to embrace Web 2.0, they can't because their employees don't know the first thing about Twitter marketing or blogging. Become a resource on all things Web 2.0 and it might lead to a promotion.

5. Learn and grow.

Fact: There have been over 9 billion Twitter updates (also called tweets) to date. (Reed, 2010)

With all of the blog posts, Facebook updates, and tweets out there, it's nearly impossible not to learn something new each day. Web 2.0 is a great place for self-education, both formal and informal. Maggiani notes that social networks in particular, "capture the essence of the community members and their backgrounds and expertise." (20, 2009) The Web 2.0 world is full of things to learn. As Einstein said, "Once you stop learning, you start dying."

Your Success and Web 2.0

So, you're convinced that you need Web 2.0 and you want to become a self-proclaimed expert. Where do you start? How do you end up a success story and not another fish in the Internet Sea?

1. Define success.

Navigating Web 2.0 is no different than driving a car or shopping during the holiday season – the best results come when there is a plan or predetermined course of action involved. Charting a course of navigation for Web 2.0 eliminates or reduces most unnecessary evils, such as disorganization, pointless actions, and inconsistency. You *need* a plan, goals, and objectives if you're going to make an impact in a Web 2.0 society.

Here are a few questions to guide you as you develop your plan, goals, and objectives for your Web 2.0 experience:

- What are my long terms goals? (Example: "I want to start a blog about puppies.")
- What do I need to do to make this happen? (Example: "I need to find a quick and easy blogging service.")
- What specific objectives do I need to complete? (Example: "I need to set aside at least 30 minutes a day to read, write, and learn about puppies.") (Kealey, 2010)

2. Find a system of measurement.

Once a plan for success has been developed, a system of measurement is needed. If you don't have a way of measuring your goals and objectives, how will you know if you have succeeded?

Here are a few basic systems of measurement that you can utilize:

- Are you getting any responses? (Examples: replies on Facebook and Twitter or comments on blog posts)
- Are the responses useful? Do they facilitate conversation?
- Is your network growing in size? (Example: Your number of Facebook friends is increasing and not decreasing.)
- What kind of feedback are you getting? (Tip: Negative feedback is almost always more useful than positive feedback.) (Microgeist, 2009)

3. Try it out.

After deciding how you will measure your success in a Web 2.0 world, it's time to pull the trigger. Take action on your goals and objectives and start creating content. It can be a bit

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scary at first, especially if you're still leery about how everything will turn out, but it has to be done.

When you begin to put your plan in motion, remember these things:

- Stay positive. You're going to want to quit and give up because sometimes a Web 2.0 world isn't as glamorous as it seems. It's tough to navigate, confusing, and can be annoying at times. Keep your goals in mind and keep moving forward.
- Failure isn't a bad thing. In fact, failure is necessary to grow. Some of the most influential people in the history of the world failed big time. Thomas Edison. Abraham Lincoln. Martin Luther King, Jr. Failure might hold you back temporarily but it helps you in the long run.
- It's not about you, it's about your friends and followers. In a "me, me, me" world, this is tough to remember but it's necessary for success in a Web 2.0 society. Do what is best for the success of your connections, not your own glory. Web 2.0 is about "collaboration and creation, not command and control." (Kealey, 2010)

4. Assess your progress.

Once you've gotten your feet wet in the wide world of Web 2.0, it's time to take a step back and assess your progress. It can be tough to maintain a bird's eye view when battling in the trenches of blogs, Twitter, and YouTube, but it will only make you a more valuable (and marketable) asset. It's critical to celebrate your successes and failures from time to time.

Here are a few questions to gauge your progress thus far:

- In what areas do I excel? Why have I excelled?
- What areas need improvement?
- How can I use my strengths to overcome my weaknesses?

5. Make the necessary changes.

It's time to start over. It's time to adjust your plan, goals, and objectives. If you don't modify your course of action, you may never achieve success in a Web 2.0 world. Modifications are necessary if you're going to succeed. Just ask Thomas Edison. He failed over 10,000 times to create the incandescent light bulb. He readjusted and tried again. When asked about his difficulties, Edison stated, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." He eventually found the one path to success and so can you.

Conclusion

The world of Web 2.0 is here to stay because user-generated content is king. Web 2.0 is an important part of life to embrace. Millions of people use social networking and blogs to interact, connect, and go through life together. More importantly, individuals are utilizing Web 2.0 to share their thoughts and opinions. You are now the technical communicator, no matter your age, background, or day job. People are speaking up in record numbers and change is occurring no matter where you look.

We need your voice and your expertise.

It's time for you to join the communication revolution.

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