



**The Future of Technical
Communication Is Socially Enabled:**

Understanding the Help 2.0 Revolution

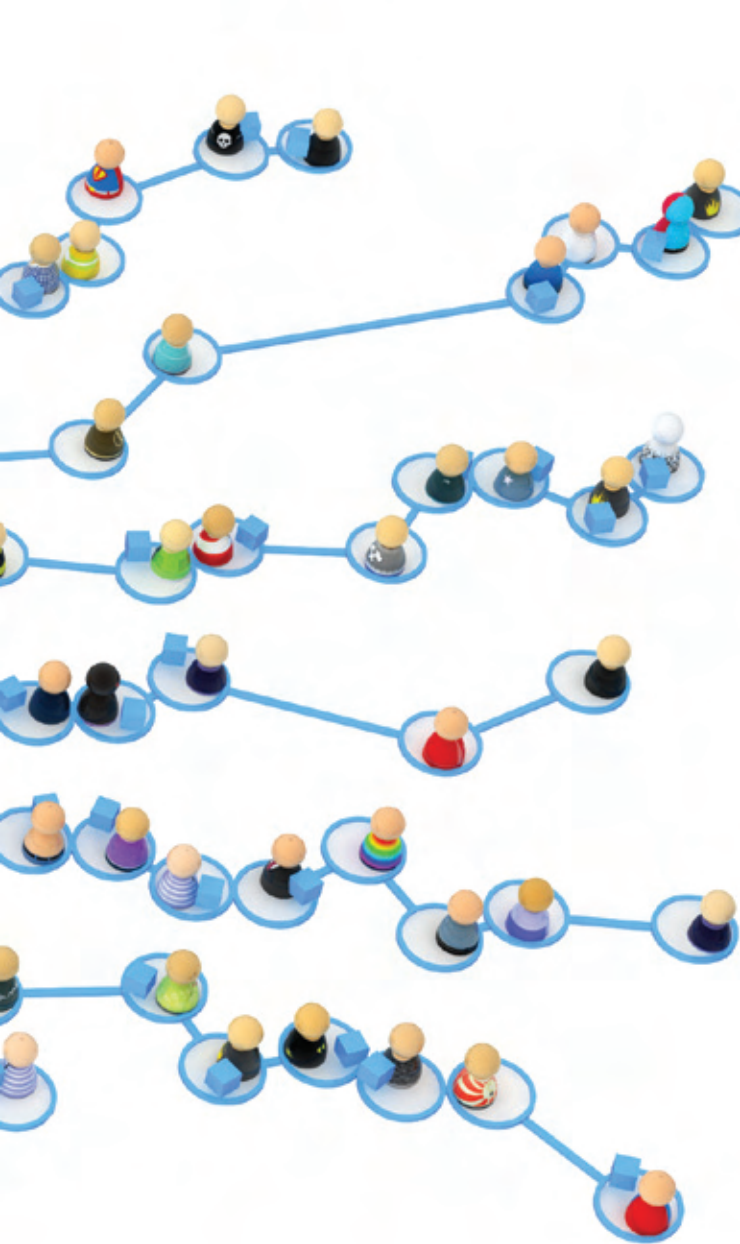


Figure 1. Help 2.0 is the next generation of customer support. It leverages the power of the crowd, content syndication, social networks, and user-generated content to create exceptional support experiences.

Old School Support: Help 1.0

When we started our well-intentioned move from providing users with paper-based documentation to providing them with electronic access to technical support content, we used the Web as just another channel: Help 1.0. We populated websites with digital copies of printed documentation—downloadable, keyword-searchable PDF files. And we repurposed content from printed manuals, pushing it to other digital formats (e.g., online help, CD, DVD). While these were all steps in the right direction, and at the time, the best methods for helping customers find information they need, they are no longer acceptable support solutions.

Socially Enabled Support: Help 2.0

Think of Help 2.0 (not to be confused with Microsoft Help 2.0 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_Help_2)) as the next generation of customer support. It encompasses all of the learning we've acquired since the advent of Help 1.0, and it leverages new techniques, devices, and approaches—many of which did not exist a few years ago.

Help 2.0 is about creating experiences that meet (even exceed) customer expectations. Did you catch that? It's not just about creating support content, it's about creating support experiences your customers will find useful. It's about making the right information, in the right language, in the right format, available to the right people at the right time. And it also means making that content accessible to those who need it, on the device they prefer, in ways that they find beneficial (whether our psychic power predicted such needs or not).

Help 2.0 is about letting go of old-school, preconceived notions about our role as content providers. Help 2.0 forces us to realize that by leveraging the knowledge of the crowd we can help users find the right information quickly and easily, whether we created the content ourselves or not. And perhaps most importantly, Help 2.0 is about creating support experiences in which users can help us learn what they want and need, while also allowing them to assist one another, in ways that are meaningful to them.

BY SCOTT ABEL | *Senior Member*

THE FIELD OF technical communication has come a long way in a short time. We've been impacted in positive ways by all sorts of technological advances. We've moved from authoring content on typewriters to personal computers, from creating printed documentation to digital files, and from authoring content in proprietary formats to creating content that adheres to open, international standards.

We've learned new approaches, adopted lessons learned from other disciplines, and discovered the secret to creating multiple deliverables from a single source of content. We've challenged ourselves to reduce jargon, to standardize terminology, and to reuse content—to componentize, optimize, and personalize it.

We've made all these changes, and yet, despite our best efforts, we're still failing to meet the most basic needs of our customers. We're stuck creating Help 1.0-style content in a Help 2.0 world. And that has got to change.

Characteristics of Socially Enabled Help 2.0 Support Sites

Socially enabled Help 2.0 support sites differ from traditional online help sites in several significant ways.

Help 2.0 sites are:

- ▶ **Online communities**—Help 2.0 support sites are more accurately described as socially enabled online support communities—social help centers for product support information. Members can log in, create a profile (or leverage their existing social network profiles), ask questions, post information, search for content, and help others. Member behavior can be tracked and those who accomplish certain tasks (helping others, correcting errors, creating original content) are rewarded with points that can be exchanged for digital candy, things like badges (<http://mashable.com/2010/06/08/foursquare-badge-reward/>), special privileges, or free products and services.
- ▶ **Hubs for collaboration**—Help 2.0 support sites provide content creators with a collaborative authoring (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collaborative_writing) environment that enables the coauthoring of content. Technical writers, editors, and, in some situations, customers can work together to create, edit, and publish content within a Web browser, without the need for desktop authoring tools.
- ▶ **Rich feedback collection vehicles**—Help 2.0 support sites provide your customers with an easy way to provide feedback (<http://mashable.com/2010/02/21/deal-with-negative-feedback/>). Errors, omissions, and confusing content can be pointed out by your customers, or by your support staff, so that improvements can be made quickly.
- ▶ **Sources of business-critical metrics**—Help 2.0 support sites are designed to collect, process, and present actionable social insight analytics to those who need them. Help 2.0 sites include a control panel that allows managers to access reports that can tell them how well their content is doing (how many people have viewed a help topic, rated it favorably or not, printed it, emailed it, commented on it, edited it, or shared it with others). Help 2.0 sites also provide managers with

data about the actions of both official content contributors (employees) and community members.

- ▶ **Great search engine optimization assistants**—Help 2.0 support sites allow support center managers to optimize their sites for search engines. Site search log reports tell you which keywords your customers use to search for answers, not the keywords your marketing team “divines” with the help of a crystal ball and a thesaurus. The words consumers use to search for assistance on your site are likely to be the same terms they use when searching Google.
- ▶ **Revenue and sales drivers**—Help 2.0 support sites not only help reduce costs by streamlining the content creation process through collaboration and by allowing members to help one another, but, when implemented well, they also present a positive image of your brand and engender trust in your competency as providers of a positive customer support experience.

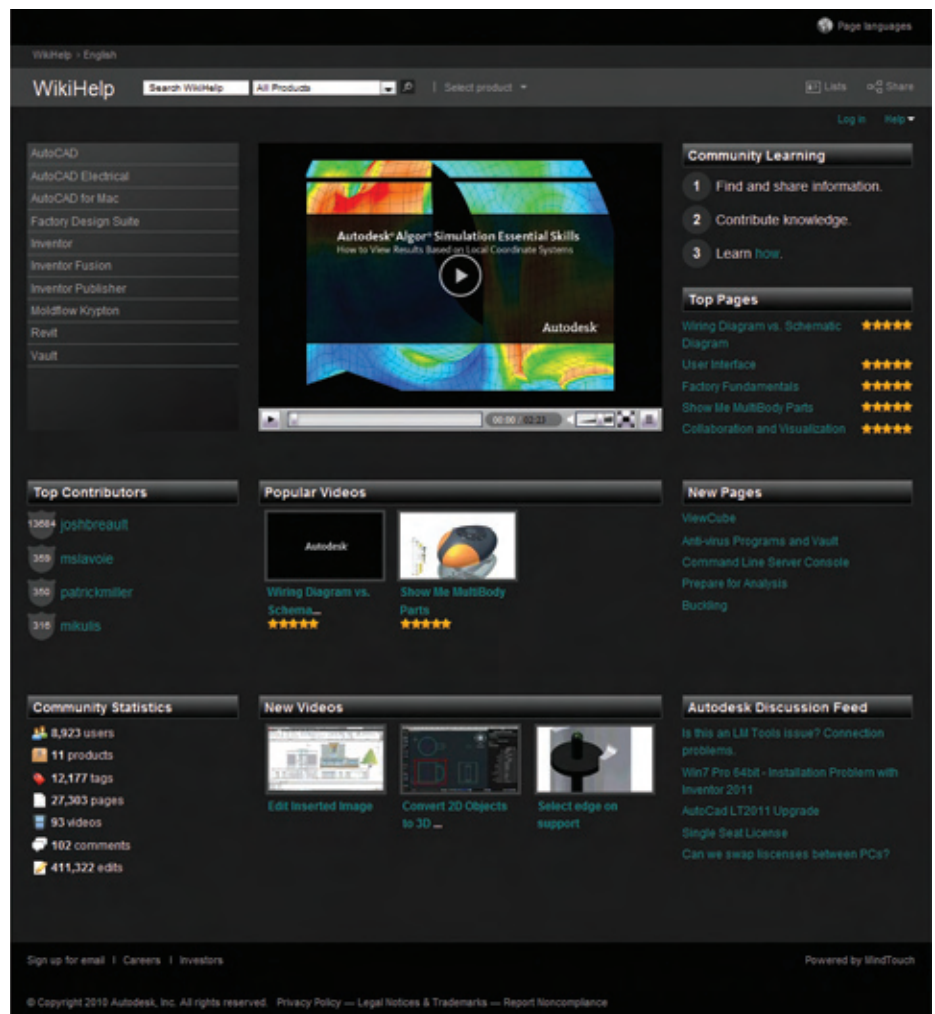


Figure 2. One part traditional support website, one part membership organization, Help 2.0 sites are socially enabled online support communities that provide many ways for visitors to find answers. They encourage participation by providing incentive rewards; allow members to rate, comment on, and share content; supply rich analytics; and facilitate member-to-member communication.

Features of Socially Enabled Help 2.0 Support Sites

Socially enabled Help 2.0 support sites offer features including:

- ▶ **Collaborative authoring**—Help 2.0 support sites provide browser-based authoring environments that work similarly to commonly used authoring tools (e.g., Microsoft Word, wikis). Various levels of authoring, editing, and publishing privileges can be granted to employees (based on their role and job responsibilities), as well as to community members (based on the frequency with which they participate, helpfulness ratings, or other criteria).
- ▶ **Membership**—Help 2.0 support sites are social help centers that provide members with product/service support through a community model. Members can access both “official” support center content and “public” content either created by other members and/or repurposed from third-party information sources. Access to content is based on membership level.
- ▶ **User-generated content**—Help 2.0 support sites are social help centers that often support the creation and publishing of user-generated content. Members are often encouraged to create and submit original articles, videos, tips and tricks, and to edit existing content already on the site. They’re also encouraged both to spot (and share) links to content found outside the site, and to share content found on the site externally via social networks. And they are allowed to rate content (no matter who provided it), ask questions of other members, and answer questions submitted by others.
- ▶ **Content personalization**—Help 2.0 sites marry user behavior information (keyword searches, downloads, purchases, contributions to the support site) with social profile data from third-party sources (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, FourSquare, YouTube) using an iTunes-like “genius search” to orchestrate a content-rich support experience. Content from third-party sources—tweets, blog posts, event information, news articles, how-to videos, user-generated content, and location-specific

data—can be aggregated together with company-created support content to provide an all-encompassing view of the information available on a particular topic, regardless of where it exists, personalized to the interest areas of a specific user.

- ▶ **Social incentives**—Help 2.0 support sites provide individual community members with the ability to earn expanded content contribution privileges, enhanced access to content reserved for members who participate, and access to special events, early product release programs, and even free products and services.
- ▶ **Content curation**—Help 2.0 support sites take advantage of content syndication standards like Really Simple Syndication (RSS), allowing members to easily customize their support experience by adding feeds of information from sources (magazines, blogs, discussion forums, video channels) they find relevant and useful.



Figure 3: Help 2.0 sites track member behavior and provide community statistics that can be used to make business decisions based on actionable data. These metrics can help you locate bottlenecks, spot inaccurate content, and detect other negative issues so they can be addressed quickly. These metrics can also help you determine which members are your biggest evangelists or best volunteer support center helpers so you can reward them.

- ▶ **Content analytics**—Help 2.0 support sites integrate critical measurement data (analytics) into many aspects of the site. The site keeps track of data important to community management and members alike. Help 2.0 sites report personal analytics (metrics about the member), group analytics (metrics about groups of members), and site analytics (metrics associated with the site). Drilling down into these analytics reports can provide community managers with actionable data they can use immediately to address bugs, correct errors, spot problems, detect trends, and assign resources.

Help 2.0 and Return on Investment

Far too often, providing technical documentation and customer support materials are considered by management as a necessary evil. The cost of developing these materials is viewed as a negative or part of the cost of doing business.

This view is outdated and only considers the expenses associated with the creation and delivery of user-assistance content. It fails to take into account the positive impact on business of providing prospective and current customers with an exceedingly good customer support experience. Providing great support experiences not only satisfies current customers, it's also a magnet for new customers, many of whom rely on recommendations from friends to help them determine which products to consider purchasing. The better your customer support experiences are, the more likely it is that your customers will evangelize your brand and tell others about your outstanding support.

In a recent survey (<http://bit.ly/eANmt8>), 72% of consumers say customer service influences their decision to buy a product or service. There is also a body of anecdotal information indicating a direct correlation between pre-sales exposure to high-quality support experiences and increases in sales. And as many as 80% of consumers surveyed say recommendations, ratings, and product reviews from friends—even virtual friends, fans, and followers on social networks—impact their decision to purchase products and services. In other words, customers are checking out your support sites and online documentation as well as what others are saying about your offerings, and these experiences directly impact whether they purchase your products or not.

“Online product and services documentation has proven to be an immensely effective way to increase new customer acquisition and to shorten sales cycles. It is now a critical business tool which is driving top-line revenue, decreasing support costs and increasing customer satisfaction,” said Aaron Fulkerson, MindTouch CEO in an article for *Forbes.com* (<http://bit.ly/cq10rZ>).

Fulkerson says that some companies “are reporting that their documentation is bringing in over 50% of their qualified leads.” In his own company, Fulkerson says, “70% plus of our site traffic is from organic sources, and

our documentation generates more than half of our overall site traffic. Furthermore, over half of our lead generation is driven by our documentation.”

Technical Communication and The Help 2.0 Revolution

Technical communication professionals are well positioned to take the lead in the Help 2.0 revolution, but doing so is going to involve change. In order for technical communicators to remain relevant (and gainfully employed), we have to focus on our primary directive—helping users accomplish their goals. Doing so means realizing that old-school approaches of managing content are no longer sufficient. It means admitting that we do not know all the answers, that we cannot document everything we'd like to, that we cannot ignore the value of customers helping us improve the content services we provide them. It also means that relying on psychic power is not a best practice in creating exceptional user experiences.

The emergence of socially enabled support communities will provide technical communicators with a wealth of employment opportunities. Creating support communities that can provide meaningful metrics about our content and those who use it will help us link our content creation and customer support efforts directly to sales, further protecting our positions and helping upper management see the value of our contributions as content creators, curators, and community leaders.

In the June 2011 issue of *Intercom*, I will explore how authoring and publishing tools are changing to support the creation and management of Help 2.0 support communities and what new roles, responsibilities, and skills we will need in order to succeed. **f**

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