Web 2.0 in two minutes

By Heather Carine

Web 2.0 is the umbrella term used to describe some new collaborative web tools that are proving to be extremely popular. It's the web that fits perfectly with our desire to share our creative output in words, pictures, video or sounds to a connected world. Social networking, wikis, blogs and forums that facilitate sharing content and ideas are all part of web 2.0, with social networking sites taking centre stage.

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Social networking

On the surface, all social networking sites connect people to a wider network of contacts that are on a similar wavelength. Sign up and start building your global online connections with a world that want to share videos (youtube), photos (flickr), music (myspace), business achievements (linkedin) or online life story through words, videos and photos (facebook).

The success of social networking sites is that they complement the physical world, where we search for information on things that interest us and then talk about what we have seen and heard with our friends and colleagues. Our friends are now people we meet up with or have been introduced to through mutual connections on social networking sites.

Myspace is the social networking site that has been embraced particularly by teens and musicians. It mirrors the steps of how we are introduced to new music – from friends, connections with other musicians and through airplay. Online radio and music sites now link us to a band's myspace site, where you can hear and download music, get an online sense of a musician's influences, and connect with friends who share your taste in music.

Similarly, linkedin (http://www.linkedin.com), a business social networking site, boldly claims that it is what networking should be. Linkedin does a good job of facilitating online introductions between business people through their mutual trusted connections or similar professional interests.

Wikis

Wikis are collaborative websites. The most famous is Wikipedia, a collaborative encyclopaedia that has grown to more than nine million articles contributed by more than 75,000 people all over the world. You don't need to establish your credentials to write on a topic, so anyone can register and add or edit an article. It should be chaos, and sometimes it is. Wikipedia has dispute resolution processes to resolve disputed content.

Why would you want to establish a wiki where you don't have control over the content being added? Simple – it uses the same principle as social networking sites to engage with a community that shares your passion. Long before wikis, there were directories on the web where interested parties would add links to alert likeminded people to new sites covering their topic of interest.

Wikis are the next step on from shared directories and allow a wider audience to add and edit content, rather than just link to new websites. Within organisations, wikis are likely to be popular in the second phase of intranets, because they are easier for large groups to update and maintain and require less third-party maintenance.

Researchwikis.com (http://www.researchwikis.com) is a fairly basic example of a public wiki that summarises market research reports covering a wide range of market segments in the United States. On a more sophisticated level, the Encyclopaedia of Life (http://www.eol.org), launched in late February, is an ambitious wiki project that aims to become a 1.8 million-page free online encyclopaedia documenting all the known species on Earth, with information contributed by scientists and amateurs.

Blogs and forums

Blogs and forums are discussion platforms. Organisations or communities often use forums for members or readers to post a discussion point that will invite comments from other registered users. Blogs are more often the comments of an individual that are posted to the web and that encourage comments from readers.

The melding of corporate websites with blogs, forums and other simple feedback mechanisms that actively engage their audience is an interesting space in the web 2.0 world. Media companies are demonstrating the depth and potential of web 2.0 as they actively seek feedback from their readers on the articles written by their journalists.

The Australian, as an example, has 30 blogs written by its columnists that attract a lot of reader feedback and bring new life to opinion writing. The web 2.0 feedback on articles is simply a more transparent version of the traditional letter to the editor, which may or may not be published in print form because of space constraints.

The joy of web 2.0 is that we quickly get to see the diversity of feedback from readers, ranging from insightful to feral. Feedback comments are moderated and may not be published if they are defamatory, derogatory, racist or in contempt of court.

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Incorporating a public feedback mechanism into an organisation's website has enormous potential for sites that lack a personal presence. Slowly, corporate and business group websites are starting to meld web 2.0 into their online presence to bring together their expertise and the views of their readers.

Examples include the Australian Marketing Institute's revamped website, which has a Feedback Forum for posting feedback on Marketing Update articles, and Hitwise (http://www.hitwise.com), which has five analysts writing blogs analysing search engine traffic.

Here's the rub, though. Blogs open up the opportunity for customers and readers to make negative or ill-informed comments in a very public forum. Not having a blog or other feedback mechanism on your site doesn't prevent the comment being made public. There are so many opportunities for people that are passionate about subjects to make public comments that they will search out other public forums to air their views. BusinessWeek advises companies to consider criticism received via blogs as a form of market research!

The tools and effects of web 2.0 are still in their early development stages, but they are likely to throw up many more opportunities for marketers to connect with, research and market to their target audiences. ●