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Web 2.0: What It Can Mean to Your Business

by Sharon Ewert

If the newest wave of Web technologies has you baffled, you are not alone. But it's not a moment too soon to become familiar with technologies such as wikis—which are changeable Web pages with content that can quickly and easily be edited by many users—and mashups, which let people view and combine information from many sources on a single site. These technologies are being adopted by corporate America to enable people to collaborate and interact with the Web and with each other as never before.

Web 2.0 has been around for several years, yet there still isn't agreement on a definition. According to *Time Magazine*, Web 2.0 is a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Other definitions refer to the tools that enable new forms of interactivity, collaboration, and data, audio, and video sharing.

Associated Press CEO Tom Curley said in his keynote speech to the Online News Association Conference on November 12, 2004, "... *content* will be more important than its *container* in this next phase of the Web. Killer apps such as search, real simple syndication (RSS), and video-capture software—to name just a few—have begun to unlock content from any vessel we try to put it in.

"Web design during Web 1.0 was all about building compelling places on the Web to put content in. But content can no longer be contained in a single place. Web 2.0 is about building event-driven *experiences*, rather than sites. RSS, for example, lets people subscribe to your content and read it in an aggregator any time, without regard for design."

Most of us have used these technologies without knowing it. If you've joined a social networking group such as LinkedIn or Visible Path, used a podcast, blogged, used Google Maps and Earth, contributed to a wiki, or used an RSS feed, you've used Web 2.0 technologies.

A host of technologies provide a new set of tools that lets users:

- Build online communities and social networks.
- Share photos, video, audio, and content.
- Collaborate with colleagues in real time using Web-based software.
- Drag and drop one application onto another.
- "Mash up" images and content from several sites and mix them together on one site.
- Refresh images or content upon a user's action without the page reloading.
- Subscribe to aggregations of select information from multiple sources of content.

There are numerous technologies and applications available—often as open source code—that enable MySpace, Google Maps and Earth, Wikipedia, Flickr, and numerous other interactive, collaborative Websites. Web 2.0 technologies include:

- Ajax
- CSS
- XHTML markup
- RSS
- Adobe Flash
- Tags and tag clouds
- Wiki software

- Weblog publishing
- Mashups
- REST or XML Webservice APIs

Ajax, which is a combination of JavaScript and XML, improves the user experience in browser-based applications. It calls up bits of information from other Web sources as needed and instantly incorporates it into the Web page that you are viewing. No waiting for an entire Web page to reload, because only the Ajax-coded portion of the page reloads. [Laszlo Systems](#), one of the leading Ajax providers, pioneered an open-source platform for creating and delivering rich Internet applications (RIA).

On the [Patagonia](#) site, for example, you can select a garment, click on one of the color chips, and view the garment on a model in the color of your choice—all without leaving the page. Ajax and other technologies "mash up" data and images from multiple sites onto a single page—such as a YouTube video playing on a MySpace page, or [HousingMaps.com](#), which overlays Craig's List rentals on a Google Map, showing the listings as virtual pushpins. [Chicagocrime.org](#) overlays local crime stats onto Google Maps so you can see what crimes were committed recently in your neighborhood.

Web 2.0 in the enterprise

Just a few years ago, Web 2.0 technologies were seen as cool toys. Today, there are more wiki users behind corporate firewalls than there are on the public Internet. Businesses are exploring the options and the challenges in deploying Web 2.0 and RIAs can be used to improve the user experience and the company's bottom line.

- Extend the reach of your Web content through syndication technologies such as RSS.
- Involve customers in the design and development of new products via blogs, wikis, and discussion forums.
- Improve training through video, VOIP, messaging, chat, and even mobile delivery.
- Enhance customer relationship management through new communication tools.
- Increase customer loyalty through new opportunities to contact and engage potential customers.

[Google Docs and Spreadsheets](#) has tremendous potential to reduce costs, increase time to market, and leverage collective knowledge. It is a free Web-based word processing and spreadsheet program that stores documents and spreadsheets online, which keeps documents current and lets the people you choose update files using their own computers. You can coordinate your family's to-do list from work or home, or collaborate with remote colleagues on a project.

Not everyone is sold on these new technologies, however. Corporations are using—and should use—restraint in implementing these new technologies to avoid the pitfalls associated with these applications.

Experts caution against letting the "wow factor" in these technologies drive your website. Before you take the leap, think about what you want to accomplish and determine whether the pitfalls outweigh the benefits. Three areas where Web 2.0 technologies may impair performance are: 1) search engine optimization (SEO), 2) user experience, and 3) content integrity:

1. Search Engine Optimization
 - Websites that use Ajax technologies may be overlooked by search engines because robots can't spider and index content written in JavaScript.
 - Links created with JavaScript cannot be detected by search engines.
 - Many Web 2.0 Websites are not optimized for sharing relevant search terms with the search engines.
2. User experience
 - Ajax used on some pages can annoy users. When users hover over an Ajax-programmed area on a Web page, a spring-loaded window unexpectedly opens, obscuring the content that the user was viewing. Users don't like surprises.
 - Users may not be able to bookmark pages or use the Back button on their browser for pages created in all or part with Ajax.
 - Ajax relies on JavaScript, which may be implemented differently by different browsers or even different versions of a browser.

- If users have disabled JavaScript and/or CSS on their browser, the Ajax functionality on an Ajax page will be disabled.
3. Content integrity
- The quality and veracity of information on user-provided content sites may be questionable.
 - Content without the original context can lead to misuse of information.
 - Individual works may be difficult to protect.

How to get it right

The key to good web design has not changed. Even with new technologies such as Web 2.0, addressing the needs of users is the most important consideration in developing any website. Here are some of the trends that most experts agree will improve Websites in the near future:

1. Keep your site simple and user friendly.
2. Balance Ajax capabilities with performance and usability issues.
3. Provide instant feedback whenever possible—such as auto-complete in form fields and display user requested information without reloading a page.
4. Use less gratuitous animation.
5. As accessibility becomes more important, consider having alternate renditions of the user interface for blind, low-vision, and color-blind users. Consider scalable fonts.
6. When you design your website, think in terms of objects that can be shared. Mashups will become more important.

Conclusion

Web 2.0 represents an exciting phase in the evolution of the Web. These tools have plenty of sizzle and incredible potential. Yet with each benefit, there are significant risks, many of which are unknown at this time, some of which can have a negative impact on your users' web experience and on your business.

As marketers and leaders, our challenge is to proceed with caution when considering taking our Websites from 1.0 to 2.0. Resist the temptation to let new technologies drive the direction of your Website. Make Web technology decisions that will get you closer to your customers, expand your reach, and build your brand—without jeopardizing search engine rankings, user experiences, and the integrity of your content.

About the Author

Sharon Ewert is a co-founder of Ewert Communications. Sharon works with clients such as Cisco Systems, Caspian, Omnicell, Silicon Valley PRSA, and numerous other companies and organizations. For assistance with web development strategy, content development, web design, interactive tools, website implementation, web-based database tools, and website maintenance, contact Sharon at Sharon@ewertdotcom.com.