technical expressions

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Technical Expressions Uses MadCap Flare to Deliver Best-in-Class Online and Print Documentation

INDUSTRY

• Technical Communications

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Warren Clendining | **Technical Expressions, Inc.**

Goals:

• Move to standards-based, future-ready software

• Improve content quality and consistency

• Cut project time by removing redundant efforts

• Eliminate the need for workarounds

• Use single-sourcing to publish documentation in multiple formats

Solutions:

• MadCap Flare native XML content authoring software

Benefits:

• Standards-based Flare eliminates workarounds and integrates easily with other software

• Reusable content via snippets and conditional tags eliminates redundancies and reduces errors

• Single-source multi-channel publishing makes it easy to quickly publish content to multiple print, Web and digital formats documentation packages for each service scenario, resulting in redundant content.

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Technical Expressions realizes that it is not enough to maintain the status quo. Instead, the technical communications consulting firm continues to establish its leadership through a commitment to adopting state-of-the-art best practices and technologies. Today, the firm's authoring solution of choice is MadCap Flare, which has enabled it to drive higher consistency and quality while lowering project time and costs.

Since 1994, Technical Expressions has delivered online Help systems, websites, user guides, requirement and design specifications, policies and procedures manuals, training materials, and promotional products for a broad range of companies. For many years, this content was developed in Adobe® RoboHelp®, and the firm recommended the tool to its clients. However, the firm's founder, Warren Clendining decided in 2007 that it was time to look at alternative solutions.

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"I was a RoboHelp® user for many years, but the tool started to show its age," Clendining recalled. "The proprietary software required a knowledge of many non-standard techniques, and I frequently had to create workarounds, particularly for content that would be published both in print and on the Web. Moreover product updates were slow in coming, and I needed an authoring tool that would let me move into the future."

As Clendining began evaluating alternative technical communications software for his projects and became aware of MadCap Flare. Key features that attracted him to Flare were its standards-based native XML architecture, capabilities for single-source multi-channel publishing, and support for reusable code through snippets and conditional tags. Those benefits outweighed the fact that Flare was then new to the market. Clendining decided to begin migrating his projects over to Flare 1.1.

"The conversion from RoboHelp® to Flare was seamless, and I was able to quickly take advantage of its features," said Clendining. "MadCap has delivered a solid product that easily integrates with other tools. Though there was a learning curve with Flare and the different approach to authoring with XML, the cost savings and benefits have drastically outweighed other tools."

Four years later, Technical Expressions has standardized on Flare 5.0, as have a growing number of the company's clients. Clendining says, "Many of the organizations I work with have been using technical communications tools for years and were hesitant to make a change. That has begun to change with Flare 5.0; it's a well-rounded product with a proven track record and clear staying power."

Reusable Content Improves Project Quality and Efficiency

Support for reusable content has proven to be one of the greatest benefits of using Flare. For instance, one Technical Expressions client offers subscriptions to several Internet-based services. Although the services appear to be separate, they are actually based on a common platform and share many capabilities. Previously with RoboHelp®, Clendining had to create different documentation packages for each service scenario, resulting in redundant content.

Using Flare, Clendining now lets the Internet company assemble complete user guides that cover the specific group of services each subscriber has chosen, all tied together by a single table of contents.

"With Flare, we no longer have to produce multiple topics for the same service, which has allowed us to eliminate unnecessary costs and maintenance," Clendining says.

Similarly, another company provides two versions of its Web-based services: one for external customers and one for the firm's own employees. The ability to reuse content allowed the business to avoid maintaining two separate online Help

systems. Instead, Clendining has been able to take the customer-facing Web Help and add extra detail for employees. Depending on the user's identity, the person will see either the customer or employee version of the Web Help.

"My work has fewer errors because of Flare's topic-based approach," Clendining explains. "I can make a change to one topic and that change is reflected throughout my project. It's a more efficient, cost-effective and accurate process for developing this company's online Help."

Multi-Channel Output Addresses Multiple Users

While companies want to take advantage of Web-based delivery, not all of their users are ready to make the move from printed manuals. Flare, with its single-source multi-channel capabilities, helps them to bridge this gap. For example, one Technical Expressions client is in a regulatory business. Some of the hands-on customers are very comfortable accessing information online, but many managers and regulators want to have the manual in a printable PDF.

"With Flare, I have been able to create and manage a single set of documentation for this customer because the same content can be delivered online, in a PDF or a Word document," Clendining said. "Even with all the rules and regulations that change and require strict compliance, I can quickly make the updates and ensure that everyone has access to the most up-to-date information, no matter how they prefer to receive it."

Educating a New Generation

In addition to running Technical Expressions, Clendining also offers technical writing training courses with Flare through the Continuing Education Department of Mount Royal University. There he uses Flare to educate a new generation of technical communications professionals on best practices.

"The documentation world is beginning to embrace newer publishing concepts like topic-based authoring and reusable content, and Flare is helping to make the transition," Clendining noted. "Flare is the way of the future, and MadCap has proven that it's not going away. Now is the time to make the move."