



A Customer Success Story in Technical
Communication Best Practices



COMPANY WEBSITE

www.licor.com

LOCATION

Lincoln, Nebraska

INDUSTRY

Scientific Instrumentation



LI-COR Biosciences Standardizes on MadCap Flare to Deliver a Modern Technical Support Center Website, Embedded Help, and Nearly 150 PDFs

GOALS

- Increase efficiency and content consistency across online and print outputs by replacing multiple tools—including Microsoft Word; Quark Express; and Adobe's InDesign, FrameMaker, PageMaker and RoboHelp products—with one authoring software product for topic-based, single-source publishing.
- Create a modern technical support center website that is intuitive, visually appealing, and consistent with corporate branding.
- Incorporate robust search functionality and multimedia to help users easily find the information they need.
- Strengthen collaboration and version control among LI-COR's technical writers.

SOLUTIONS

- MadCap Flare for advanced single-source, multi-channel content authoring
- MadCap Contributor for reviewing and contributing to Flare-based documentation
- MadCap Capture for screen capture and image editing

BENEFITS

- **Efficiency** — MadCap Flare's topic-based, single-source publishing simplifies the delivery of an HTML5-based support website, Help embedded in software, and a range of print and online PDF files.
- **Modern Web Design** — Top navigation, responsive design, and the inclusion of marketing web design elements in the MadCap Flare-based support website help it match LI-COR's corporate website.
- **Optimized User Experience** — Robust search functionality and embedded multimedia with MadCap Flare provide a modern, inviting web experience with easy-to-navigate content.
- **Collaboration** — MadCap Contributor and the integration of MadCap Flare with GitHub facilitate collaboration and version control among LI-COR's technical writers.

LI-COR Biosciences is a leading innovator in systems for plant research, gas analysis, drug discovery, protein research and small animal imaging. From understanding tumor biology in the Netherlands to palm oil production in Malaysia, scientists rely on LI-COR products and services in more than 100 countries around the world to address important biological and environmental challenges.

Complementing LI-COR's state-of-the-art instrument systems is a company-wide commitment to helping customers succeed through the highest levels of customer service and support. This includes interactive Help delivered via a support website and Help embedded within its software, along with a range of printed guides, manuals, and other documentation. Today, the company has standardized on MadCap Flare with its topic-based authoring and single source publishing to deliver this content.



Multiple Authoring Tools for Multiple Products

LI-COR began in 1971 with its introduction of the first low-cost light sensor filtered for the waveband absorbed by plants. Since then, the company has expanded to three groups, Environmental, Biotechnology, and Clinical that collectively provide a multitude of solutions for measuring various biological parameters.

As the company grew, so too did its documentation, but there was no standardization. Any employee creating documents could decide what applications to use.

"By 2010, our print documentation and online Help were being produced using a mix of Microsoft Word; Quark Express; and various Adobe products, including InDesign, FrameMaker, PageMaker and RoboHelp," recalled Thad Miller, technical content director for the Environmental product line at LI-COR Biosciences.

Despite the apps already in place, LI-COR added MadCap Flare for a new project that required the ability to produce both PDFs and web content.

"The appeal of Flare was that it could meet our long-standing need to produce long-form and short-form PDFs, as well as the rising need to produce HTML content for the web," Miller explained. "An

additional plus was the ability to bundle Flare output with software apps. But, single sourcing for everything was the biggest draw."



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The Move to Standardized Documentation

Meanwhile, LI-COR began to recognize that supporting its growth and ensuring a consistent, high quality experience would require the company to standardize how its Help and documentation were created.

"When we were developing tech docs in a bunch of different tools, we had issues with maintaining consistency and sharing docs from one writer to another," Miller noted. "We also were unable to create HTML content efficiently."

After evaluating several Help authoring tools, LI-COR selected MadCap Flare, both for its features and its commitment to supporting future demands.

"Among other vendors we evaluated, there wasn't a clear vision of where they were going, and it didn't seem that they were listening to tech writing professionals. We didn't want to choose an app that didn't have a future," Miller recalled. "MadCap Software presented a vision for Flare that was inspiring, and many technical writers spoke highly of it. Then, after using the trial version, it just felt like Flare developers really understood the day-to-day things we do and how to make them easier."



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Once the decision to standardize on MadCap Flare was made, the team then began the evangelism and training efforts to encourage adoption company-wide.

“It took some persuasion and showing examples of how we can do things more efficiently. Eventually the proof was evident in our day-to-day work with Flare where we were getting all this consistency,” Miller explains. “We also trained our staff and set up Flare, so now anyone can just go into Flare and write their content, and it will work in our project.”

Creating a Modern Technical Support Center Website

With Flare, it’s now a breeze for our tech writers to include video and other multimedia content to the HTML5 output. That’s also brought a lot more visibility and better search results to the content we produce.

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LI-COR’s Environmental product line, in particular, has harnessed the comprehensive capabilities of MadCap Flare to deliver all of its documentation—from PDFs to interactive online Help available on the web and embedded in its software.

Most recently, in 2018, Miller used Madcap Flare to build the entire technical support website for LI-COR’s Environmental product line (www.licor.com/env/support). The modern website takes advantage of MadCap Flare’s capabilities for HTML5, top navigation, and responsive design to create an intuitive web experience that automatically adjusts to any user’s mobile or computer screen size.

“Flare has brought me, a technical writer, into the world of the internet. Now I can write and produce web content without involving a web developer,” Miller notes.

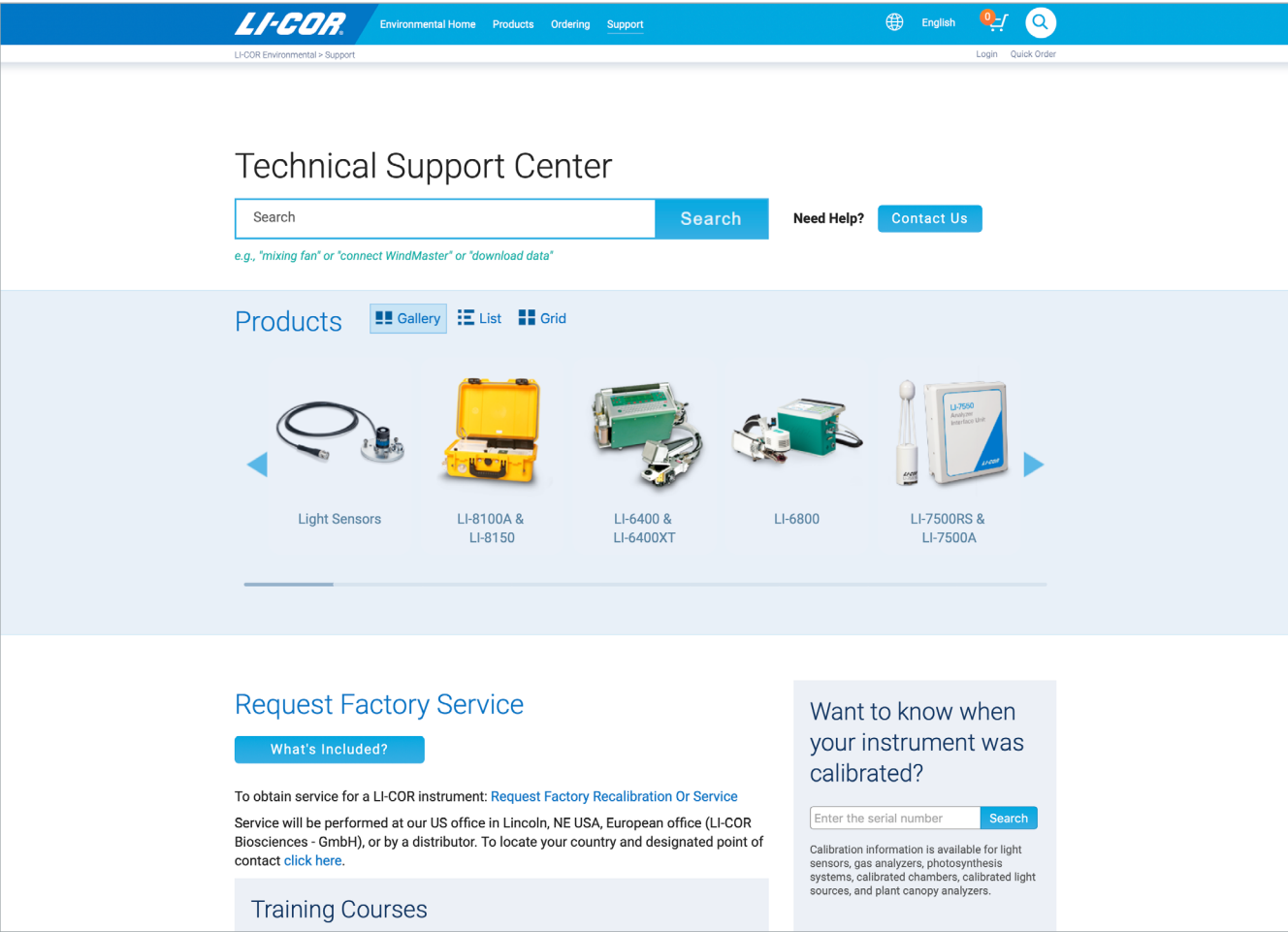
Meanwhile multimedia on the support site includes screenshots from MadCap Capture, and embedded videos from video hosting services, such as YouTube.

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LI-COR’s technical support website was created using MadCap Flare, and includes documentation for their entire environmental product line

“Capture is just a fantastic addition, and its Flare integration makes it really easy to capture screenshots,” says Miller. “We also do a lot of technical drawings for our hardware instruments, and we make a lot of these images using Capture. Even though it’s a screen capture app, it also has basic editing tools, and it’s really nice to be able to work in one environment.”

Notably, MadCap Flare’s functionality for embedding videos means the technical writers can now embed videos instead of relying on the LI-COR web team as they did in the past.

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Technical writers for the Environmental product line also link to PDF files and software executables that are hosted on a file sharing service, as well as use Google Analytics in the support site to evaluate site usage and record feedback from site visitors.

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Reinforcing the Corporate Brand



With Server Side Includes, we can bring components from our marketing site into our HTML5 Flare output, and that makes our Flare Help site look seamless with our corporate website.

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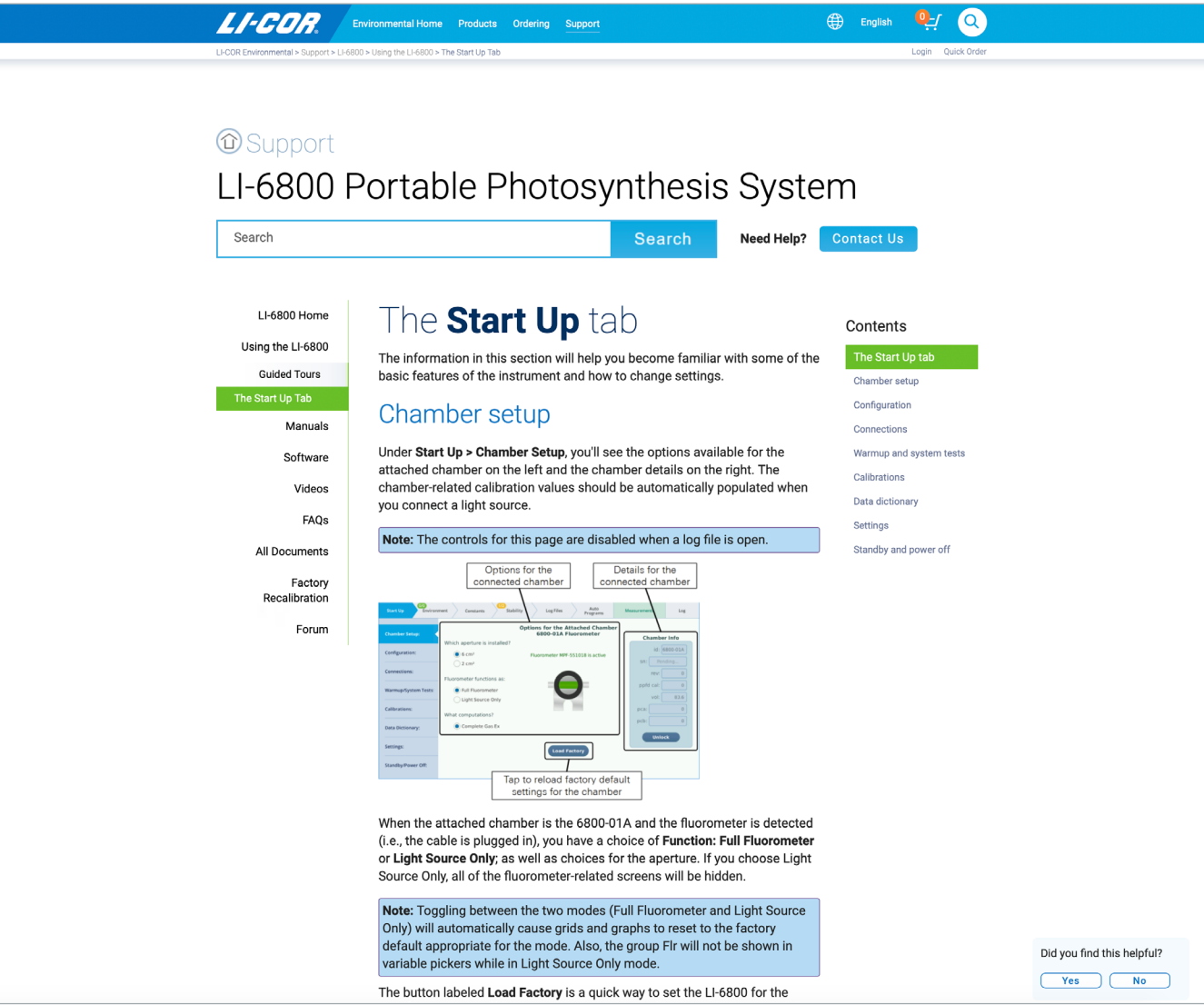
To create a look that is consistent with LI-COR’s corporate website, technical writers use Server Side Includes (SSI) technology to inject elements, such as the corporate header and footer, into the MadCap Flare-based support web site for the Environmental product line.

“With Server Side Includes, we can bring components from our marketing site into our HTML5 Flare output. Since the web designers make the header and footer, they have complete control over them, and that makes our Flare Help site look seamless with our corporate website,” Miller observes. “This has enabled us to create our support site entirely from Flare.”

Additional features within MadCap Flare also help to align the support site with the corporate site, notes Miller: “We use a HTML5 top nav skin that I customize to accommodate elements we add from our marketing team, and we use a separate master page for each product.”

Beyond reinforcing the LI-COR corporate brand, the technical writing team also uses Server Side Includes to add forms that customers fill out on the Flare-created support site. These forms send data to its Marketo marketing automation software and Salesforce customer relationship management (CRM) system.

“Being able to send data from Flare HTML5 output to our marketing and CRM software gives us another avenue for understanding how we can provide our customers with superior service and support,” Miller says.



LI-COR ensures consistency across its product documentation with topic-based authoring, single-source publishing functionality, conditional text, cascading style sheet (CSS), and table of contents (TOC) files

Ensuring Consistency and Quality Across Content



Doing all of our technical content in Flare has enabled us to do more than we could before, simply because everything is together, done the same way, and can be produced in the same target. Flare has effectively doubled our productivity.

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The Flare-based support site is just one of some 150 targets for the Environmental product line, which currently includes 25 different offerings. The technical writers also use MadCap Flare to produce HTML5 Help content that is embedded into its applications, and PDFs for online and print. The PDFs can take the form of quick-start guides, installation guides, technical notes, and instruction manuals that can be over 400 pages long.

“Doing all of our technical content in Flare has enabled us to do more than we could before, simply because everything is together, done the same way, and can be produced in the same target,” Miller observes. “We basically doubled our product portfolio and kept our technical writing staff the same size. So, Flare has effectively doubled our productivity.”

To facilitate reuse and ensure consistency across all of its product documentation, LI-COR’s technical writers rely on several features within MadCap Flare, including topic-based authoring, single-source publishing functionality, conditional text, cascading style sheet (CSS), and table of contents (TOC) files.

“Now with Flare, I just do single sourcing and re-use so automatically. Content that I create in Flare is likely going to end up in a PDF and a website as HTML. Our style sheet is set up to make that happen, and that enables us to be much more efficient,” Miller explains. “We use a lot of conditional text with Flare for different documentation targets. And we use TOCs throughout our support site to help customers find information.”

Meanwhile, LI-COR’s technical writers take advantage of the MadCap Analyzer functionality, which is now embedded within MadCap Flare, to improve the quality of its output.

“Analyzer is a huge benefit. I often end up with a few images that I don’t need or files here and there I don’t use, and Analyzer will find all of these things, along with unused or unlinked files,” Miller

observes. “It is a handy way to keep a project clean, and it frees me from having to track every little file, so I can focus on writing content.”

In developing content, the technical writing team also takes advantage of MadCap Flare to help structure content with translation in mind.

“Our distributors normally handle translations for their local market, though we’ve done some localizations with MadTranslations on a case-by-case basis. Although our content is highly technical, MadTranslations has always returned high-quality translated content that doesn’t need a lot of extra attention.” Miller says.

Simplifying Collaboration and Version Control

To facilitate collaboration and version control, LI-COR’s technical writers rely on MadCap Contributor and GitHub.

“We produce our product catalog with Flare, and our product specialist uses Contributor to do the editing and writing,” Miller explains. “The specialist doesn’t have to really know Flare, and the learning curve for Contributor is a lot lower.”

Whether relying on MadCap Flare’s integration with GitHub or using the GitHub desktop app, LI-COR’s technical writers have found that the version control software works equally well with Flare. Notably, it allows the writers to work on branches, so that they can update content for one product in Flare without having it tied to the main body of content.

GitHub also plays a role in Flare-based HTML5 software that gets combined LI-COR applications. A technical writer will publish to a directory that is connected to a GitHub repository being used by the software developer. The developer then merges that content into the source files and compiles the app to produce Flare-created skinless HTML5 as part of the application. To enable the embedding of the Flare HTML5 output, the technical writer works with the developer to agree on the “hooks” that call the appropriate content and other details.


“The ability to use Flare and GitHub together has helped us in ways that I could hardly ever imagine before we started,” says Miller.

Enhanced Support Experience

From a business perspective, LI-COR wants to support customers by making it as fast and easy as possible for them to find the answers they need. However, in the old technical support site for Environmental products, users basically had to search several PDFs. And even if those users could find the right PDF file, they still had to find an answer that might be located in the middle of a very large PDF document. By contrast, the HTML5 support website built with Flare enables users to quickly find answers to their questions.

“With Flare, we have developed topic-based online content that is much easier to navigate. And the search functionality in both Flare and Google is very robust, so all of our content is much more visible to customers,” Miller explains. “We’ve gotten feedback from users that they’re really pleased with the speed and accuracy of the search results. It’s a night-and-day difference between our old online support and our new Flare-based support site.”


Miller adds, “What we’re doing with Flare in 2019 vastly exceeds what I imagined we’d be doing when we first adopted it. It’s been a delight that we keep being able to do more with each Flare release, and I intend to keep using Flare for a long time.” 🍌



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