On the Same Page: A Wiki Redux

Susan L. Jennings

Program Abstract: At TLA last year, Susan Jennings demonstrated the use of wikis in library services and shared a dream for her Access Services Wiki. Come see this demonstration of the real life application of how wikis can be used as both training tool and resource for all public service desk staff.

At last year's TLA in Chattanooga, TN, Susan Jennings of Belk Library, Appalachian State University (ASU), spoke of her goal of creating an Access Services Wiki so that everyone on her team would be "On the Same Page."   The creation of a wiki seemed to be the perfect answer to collocate Belk Library's "unofficial" information not found on the traditional library web site yet quickly point to "official" information found through official channels. The need for a wiki became self evident due to the fact that the Access Services Team was spread out over five floors and maintained the building 119 hours per week over several shifts. Because the library is often manned by an army of student assistants, many of whom were either lightly supervised or new trainees, Access Services needed a system in place to provide guidance and consistency of information to staffers. No matter the location or time, information could be disseminated to patrons quickly, efficiently, and more importantly, consistently. A wiki seemed to be the answer to this dilemma. Due to the immeasurable assistance of Thomas ("Tom") G. Bennett, Belk Library's Systems and Technical Support, this goal was accomplished in the summer of 2007 with the launch of the Access Services Wiki (hereafter known as "the wiki.")

In creating the wiki, it was decided to use Plone open source software to power it. Although technically a content management system (CMS), Plone is a robust software application and an excellent choice to use as the source of the wiki. The price was definitely right (It's FREE!). Plone, however, is not without its faults. Because it is open source software, there are often "bugs" which need the attention of a highly skilled IT person. Belk Library is lucky to have a brilliant IT person in Tom. Tom provided the expertise needed and has been chiefly instrumental in making the wiki operational and serves as chief troubleshooter.

Whereas the initial objective of the wiki was to create a common handbook/manual/cheat sheet for all Access Services staffers, the wiki assumed yet another role in current months . . . that of training manual. Belk Library reorganized and part of the Access Services Teams (e.g., those responsible for desk services) merged with the Reference & Instruction Team to form the Learning and Research Services Team. The name of the wiki changed from the "Access Services Wiki" to the "Desk Services Wiki" and now to just "the Wiki." Name changes were not the only things to change about the wiki. During the merging of teams, the wiki has served as a training manual and information clearinghouse. Sessions were conducted in the use and editing of the wiki for the newly formed team. In recent months, other teams in the library have used the wiki for internal communication and cross team information sharing and collaboration. This change is pleasing to the creators and represents a natural and expected progression since wikis are organic and grow and change with the growing needs of the organization.

During the TLA Session, the wiki was demonstrated, design considerations and assessment techniques used in the creation of the wiki were discussed, and a general discussion session was led on how wiki technology could be used for participant libraries.

During the demonstration, the chief design features considered were: Aesthetics, Content and Customization.

Aesthetics

In the design of the wiki, it was important to have the following included in its design. (See Figure A)

1. Pleasing colors & clean lines. A "canned" Plone template was used but was personalized with color choices, a Belk Library banner and font type style better suited to the tastes of the wiki administrator.
2. Usability & practicality
3. Multiple ways of navigating the site from traditional menu navigation to a full text search box.
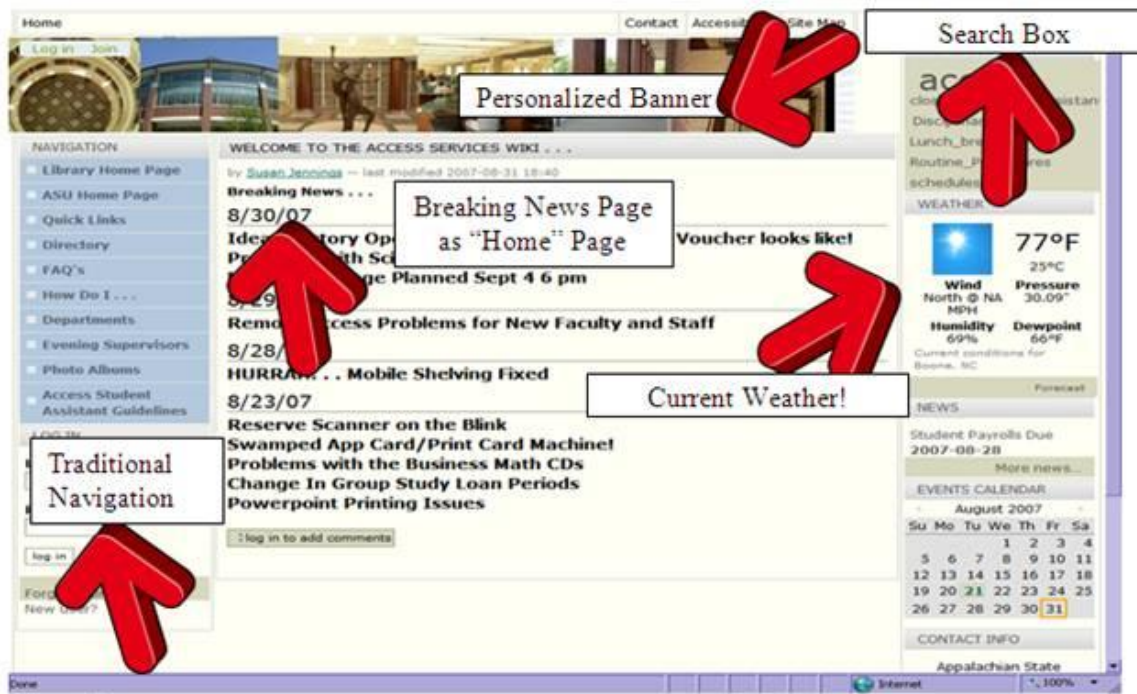4. Traditional yet with a little added "pizzazz."

Figure A

Content

The wiki was never meant to replace the library's authoritative web pages but instead enhance the information to enable quick and easy access to serve patrons more efficiently (Figure A). Wiki Content included:

1. Both authoritative (outside) and internally created pages.
2. "Add On" features that are pertinent to the environment (e.g., the Weather Widget. Weather is critical to ASU Library, especially for those working in a windowless environment.)
3. Prominent links to the library web site and other pertinent pages featured prominently in the navigation menu.
4. Easy access to forms and procedures needed daily.
5. A "Breaking News" as a "Home" page.
6. Information included which made the wiki a pseudo electronic operations manual.

Customization Features

Plone was chosen as the software of choice because . . .

1. It is FREE so there was more "bang for the buck!"
2. It has the ability for multi-leveled permissions.
3. ASU had Plone expertise in-house.

4. It includes a variety of "Add-on" products with the promise of even more useful add-ons currently under development.
5. It is easy to use (i.e. in navigating and editing). Plone uses a WYSIWYG (a.k.a. "What You See is What You Get") editor. If one can send a web based email, one can edit a wiki.

In the creation of the wiki, there were a few obstacles to overcome. For one, Plone can be unintuitive and difficult to configure. It is critical that the IT involved in the setup be familiar with the Z Object Publishing Environment (a.k.a. "Zope") application server on which Plone runs. Plone is also very unforgiving and not a system for the faint of heart. One wrong "click" of a check box can wreck havoc. For example, in setting permissions, this author went a step too far. When trying to view the edited page, the message that appeared indicated that "It seems as if you do not have permission to the page requested. If you feel that you have reached this message in error, please email Jenningssl@appstate.edu for permission!" (On a PERSONAL NOTE: Emailing MYSELF DIDN'T work! Tom Bennett had to come to the rescue once again!)

No matter the service or tool it is imperative to evaluate effectiveness. Assessment is truly the key. The assessment of wikis is no exception. Some key elements to remember and to which to commit are:

1. Assessment of design features and usability can easily be accomplished by polling users, library faculty and staff, and professional colleagues outside the library. User Feedback is crucial to the success of the wiki! If users are not happy with design and usability, they will not use the wiki no matter the valuable information contained within.
2. Because the wiki is not a static product, wiki administrators and users should evaluate the wiki by vigilance in anticipating possible future needs of users.
3. There must be a commitment by the wiki administrator to keep up with new "Add On" Plone products (i.e. new widgets, etc). This will enable the wiki to grow and change with user needs and preferences.
4. The wiki administrator must explore evaluation of the usability of the wiki by the use of computer assisted assessment technology as well as through user feedback.

The bottom line is: Even if a library is not fortunate as Belk Library in having an IT person like Tom Bennett to administer a Plone wiki, this should not deter them from exploring the plethora of wiki product options available. There are many good "farmed out" sites that, for little or no cost, can provide a wiki environment to suit every libraries needs and tastes. So, Happy wiki-ing!!