

Web 2.0

Phil Bradley

Chat and discussion resources

Some of the many ways to talk to others on the Web

Introduction

One of the things that I've noticed when dealing with social media is that there are now just so many different ways to communicate with and talk to people. In the old days it was really easy; you rang them up and talked to them over the telephone, or you wrote to them. For really exotic forms of communication you could send them a telex or a telegram or fax. However these days there are so many different ways to talk to people it makes my head spin. Obviously I can use e-mail but if I know that they use Twitter I can send them a direct message there. On the other hand, if they are heavy Flickr user then I could always send them a memo using Flickr mail. If they are on Facebook I can catch them in Facebook chat, and much the same can be said if they are a Gmail user since I can use Google's own chat functionality. Alternatively I can use the Microsoft live messenger service; this is one I use a lot myself as I find it particularly useful and easy. If I prefer to listen to their voice and have them hearing mine I can always use Skype and have a chat with them

that way. These are just a very few of the different ways in which I can talk to people.

What I thought I would do in this column is introduce you to a few different resources that you may wish to try out yourself by getting one of your friends or colleagues (otherwise known as "victim") to help you out. As an aside, I have noticed that chat room facilities are something which people do find quite difficult to get used to. I will quite often open up a chat room and encourage people to come in, and many do so, but despite encouragement they will sit there for a few minutes and then disappear again. I'm not sure if it's because they can't quite work out what they are supposed to do, if they feel self-conscious, or they simply do not like the environment. Perhaps it's a combination of all of these reasons. However, given the current financial situation, and the limited availability of finance, I suspect that a lot more of us are going to have to get used to resources of this nature because we are simply not going to have the money available to travel to a variety of different

locations in order to have meetings. Therefore, if you can get a good grasp of how these resources work, you will be well placed inside your organisation or information service to provide colleagues with good examples, and will be seen as a technological guru which is never a bad thing for information professional.

Chatrooms

The first resource I would like to mention is TinyChat, which is available at <http://www.tinychat.com>. This is an extremely effective resource, since it gives you a wide variety of different ways of conversing with people. You can make a chat room for free simply by going to the website and typing in the name of the chat room that you would like to create. There is nothing to install, nothing to download, everything works within your browser. You can choose to have a chat room that is simple text, by which I mean everybody types in what they want to say, or you can choose to have a video chat room instead. This resource allows you to share up to 12 broadcasts simultaneously, so you can have text video and audio chat with a group of people connecting from anywhere in the world. All that you require for this is a microphone and a webcam, and these days new webcams will generally come with an integral microphone which will install itself automatically on your system. I have found that if you get more than three or four people using video chat, however, the system does slow down, so I wouldn't advise this if you don't have a fast broadband connection. It's also worth making the point that not everybody needs to have a webcam available: some people can use that facility while others can simply choose to type in their responses.

Another resource that I like is a very straightforward chat room resource called Chatzy (at <http://www.chatzy.com>); this is a good alternative to Facebook Skype and Windows live, since it has no registration steps, and your friends can join instantly, it's free, with no advertising, it does not require Flash or any installation on your computer, it works with all major browsers and is simple and easy to use. When you go to the website, you simply have to fill in the name you wish to use, and the title or subject of the chat room. You can then send e-mail to your friends or colleagues to invite them into the room with a message. Simply click on the button to create your chat room and it is up and running.

If you don't like either of those two options, you could try using Meebo (<http://www.meebo.com/>). Once again this is a very flexible resource as it allows you to create your own chat rooms, invite friends and colleagues, and have discussions when you wish to. You can also add this resource to your own website, and embed the chat function directly onto a Web page.

Training and presentations

If you're interested in a chat room with a slight difference, you may wish to consider a resource that will allow you to do some training or presentations. There are many of these available, although the most sophisticated are commercial and they can cost several hundreds of pounds in subscription charges per year. Before paying large sums of money I would suggest that it's a good idea to take a look at WiZiQ (<http://www.wiziq.com>) this resource is a web-based platform (which means it runs in the browser and you don't have to download or install anything) and is designed for anyone who wants to teach and learn live online.

You could therefore consider it to be a virtual classroom or a good presentation medium. It is free for everyone to use and takes just a few seconds to register. You can integrate online using images, PowerPoint presentations and documents. You can choose to use it also for audio and video sharing, and the live chat enhances the interaction among the participants. The owner of the room has complete control over class, so it should always be able to run smoothly. You can choose when you wish to run a session and invite whoever you would like to it, upload your PowerPoint presentation for example and go through it screen by screen, encouraging participation from your friends, colleagues, or delegates. The session can also be saved for people to view afterwards.

Another resource in the same area is Vroom from Elluminate

(<http://www.learncentral.org/user/vroomreg>).

However, while this is a free resource it is really designed as a loss leader for the full Elluminate product, and so you are limited to a total of three people in any one session but you can also use video, audio or text chat with an interactive whiteboard, apps sharing, and file transfer.

Summary

These are a few different resources that are available to you, but of course there are many others and I have included just a few of them at the end of this column in case you wish to explore further. As with so many other Web 2.0 or social media resources, the tool is much less important than the activity. I have been using chat rooms since the mid-1980s so I am very familiar with the way in which they work, but if you are new to them they can be very difficult indeed. They are difficult not in terms of the technology but in terms of the

communication itself. If you have a lot of people talking or typing at the same time you will notice that a variety of different conversations take place simultaneously and it can be quite difficult to keep on top of them. Obviously the more people that you have in a room the more typing or conversing takes place, so initially you may wish to just explore these resources with one or two friends. It also helps if you are a touch-typist because you really do need to be looking at the screen to keep involved with the conversations rather than looking down at your keyboard typing in what you wish to say. While this can be initially quite daunting, as with so many other things, the more you experience chat rooms, the easier they become, and the more familiar with them you are.

Finally, social media really lives up to its name in this area. Social really does mean social and so the next time you are considering having a conversation with colleagues, or you are dreading the idea of getting up at some awful time in the morning to travel to a different part of the country for a meeting, you may find that one of these resources can really come to your rescue.

Other resources

Spread

URL: <http://www.spread.com/eu/start/startpage>

User Limits: 3 for free

Uses: Live audio/video, Powerpoint presentations, screensharing, live recording, Whiteboard

Registration/Download: Registration required.

Zorap

URL: <http://www.zorap.com/Landing.aspx#>

User Limits: Up to 50 people.

Uses: Video chat, music, watch video, share images

Registration/Download: Software download required

Adobe Connect Now

URL: <http://www.adobe.com/acom/connectnow/>

User limits: 3 people

Uses: Screenshare, chat

Registration/Download: Registration required

Skype

URL: <http://www.skype.com/>

User limits: Up to 25 people

Uses: Voice and video

Registration/Download: Download and Registration required

Webex

URL: <http://www.webex.co.uk/>

User Limits: none

Registration/Download:

Notes/Experiences: 14 day trial available free of charge

Microsoft Office Live Meeting

URL: <http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/live-meeting/>

User Limits: none

Registration/Download

Notes/Experience: 30 day trial available free of charge

GoToMeeting

URL: www.GoToMeeting.co.uk

User Limits: none

Registration/Download

Notes/Experience: 30 day trial available free of charge

Adobe Connect

URL:

<http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/>

User Limits: none

Registration/Download

Notes/Experience: 30 day trial available free of charge