

# Knowledge Management and eCommerce: No Longer the Odd Couple

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Knowledge management and ecommerce were never total strangers. What is new is that you are beginning to see this couple nearly everywhere, sometimes in the unlikeliest products. Consider the former MetaCreations-Fractal Design "Painter" product. This product's key strength is its uncanny ability to simulate natural art media: papers, paints, brush strokes, and the like. Then about a year ago Painter users received a message that MetaCreations was selling all the art product lines to Corel Corporation. MetaCreations did this so it could concentrate on repurposing its own 3D graphics technology and merge with its former subsidiary Viewpoint Corporation, known previously as "Metastream." Why? Apart from wanting to emphasize its entirely new direction, Viewpoint wanted to focus on "licensing its proprietary Viewpoint technologies for ecommerce initiatives and provide a full range of professional services for implementing enhanced 3D Web marketing solutions for e-merchants." Since pictures convey knowledge (often more richly than text, as in Web-delivered catalogs), this move combined KM and ecommerce at dizzying speed for ViewPoint.

When couples (odd or otherwise) tie the knot, there is frequently a name change. Now consider another name change: eHelp Corporation, formerly known as "Blue Sky Software." Best known for its RoboHelp Office development system, eHelp has been incrementally improving its product from developing proprietary Windows Help systems to a variety of Web and platform-independent options, including WebHelp. This product suite has matured into a true if constrained knowledge management suite, complete with single-source content to multiple platform deliveries, embedded search, and version management. eHelp sources even tell us that some customers have been able to import external XML documents into RoboHelp--an important step for scaling KM to the enterprise. The process, according to eHelp's product evangelist Michael Hamilton, requires expert knowledge of the DocBook DTD and XSLT--an XML style sheet transformation language unfamiliar to mainstream RoboHelp developers; using XSLT really amounts to customized application development. Still, as RoboHelp developers become more XML-aware and if Office itself begins supporting XML imports perhaps by bundling other XML tools, eHelp will have taken another significant step towards expanding Office's Knowledge Management capabilities. In April 2000, eHelp made a quantum leap beyond Office, although unlike Viewpoint eHelp remains committed to its flagship product. Building on its experience with Help systems, eHelp morphed into a company which might eventually be better known for new Web-based products than for RoboHelp Office. First, eHelp proposed a new XML specification to boost Web ecommerce: ALURe (Aggregation and Logging of User Requests). ALURe is designed to allow *any* Web-based "user assistance" product or system log information on specific customer problems at Web sites. Using ALURe, Web applications could track and report usage patterns in Help and customer assistance systems on Web sites. eHelp then sponsored alurexml.org to promote ALURe's acceptance; Informix (among others) signed on as partners. Shortly after this, eHelp announced two high-end Web products: DynaHelp and WebHelp Live. Currently DynaHelp and WebHelp Live are unrelated to the Office products although the similarity between "WebHelp Live" and "WebHelp" on the Office side can't be coincidence and they share a common theme: delivering help and customer assistance. Both aim to deal with an ever-increasing problem of Web complexity and its impact on ecommerce. This notion of providing Web-delivered customer assistance is a winner: Gartner estimates the average cost of a call to a Help desk to be nearly \$30, while delivering the same information via an online facility can cost 1/4 of that. With up to two out of three ecommerce customers abandoning their shopping carts before completing their purchases, Web assistance products that increase consumer satisfaction and reduce cart abandonment make a lot of sense.

WebHelp Live, which shipped in November 1999, provides live chat interaction between customers and support people. To increase support staff productivity, WebHelp Live allows one support person to provide concurrent help to several customers, unlike telephone support, which is always one-on-one. Also, by managing these sessions online, support representatives can send URLs, files, and messages to customers immediately. Since many customers still get to the Web via a single dial-up line, WebHelp Live provides an immediacy that should increase their satisfaction with the support experience.

DynaHelp includes WebHelp Live, but expands the Web assistance paradigm to include self-assistance. Version 1.5 shipped in December 1999, and its features start with existing Office technology but then go far beyond it: Natural language interface, real-time analysis of customer behavior via ALURe, support for database-driven sites, and iPredict technology anticipating customer needs based on prior requests for information. DynaHelp not only claims to enhance the consumer's experience by providing improved answers to queries, it continuously analyzes requests for information site-wide to identify trouble spots, and improves its answers. It is as though DynaHelp were continuously updating a FAQ list.

Phase one of the dot-com party ended about a year ago. That's not news. The survivors are now aggressively pursuing new fortunes. Applying knowledge management to enhance ecommerce is emerging as a key survival strategy. If you don't want to build KM products yourself, then you owe your ecommerce efforts to monitor new KM offerings. But don't overlook the opportunity to view your existing products in a new KM light.