» COLLABORATION

Teamwork, Supercharged

BY ROBERT D. HOF

I KNEW THIS STORY WAS GOING TO BE FUN AS SOON AS the first message popped up on my new Web site. Assigned to write a story about how one company uses the new collaborative Web services to improve its business, I decided I had to try it out myself. So when Richard bird, president of R.Bird & Company, Inc., offered to help set up an online workspace for me on Basecamp, the collaborative project-management service his firm uses with its clients, I jumped at the chance. Within minutes, I posted a request to several Bird clients on my workspace, which they could access with a password, and waited for them to start weighing in.

It didn't take long. One of the first responses came from Chelsea Milling Co., the Chelsea (Mich.)-based maker of those ubiquitous Jiffy brand muffin mixes, which was in the midst of the first major redesign of its cheery blue-and-white product boxes in 35 years. Clearly comfortable with this new collaborative medium, General Manager Jack Kennedy offered a pungent description of the company's plan. "We wanted to look 'refreshed' while maintaining our 'retro-hip' style," he wrote. "You know, sort of like keeping your same girlfriend, but with a great makeover!"

A lot of corporations like Chelsea are starting to tap the new collaborative possibilities of the Web. Weary of span-encrusted e-mail, static intranets, and bloated "groupware" such as Lotus Notes, they're trying out the alternatives: group blogs, editable Web sites called wikis, pumped-up Web calendars- and group project management services like Basecamp. The San Francisco market researcher collaborative Strategies LLC predicts these tools and associated hardware to run them will grow from a $23.4 billion market last year to $40 billion by 2009.

> **Web-based file sharing slashed the length of Chelsea's redesign**

Chelsea's experience with Basecamp illustrates why. Created by the five-person software developer 37signals LLC in Chicago, Basecamp lets groups of people post messages and files, create to-do lists, and set milestones for a project, all on simple, no-frills private Web pages. Items on each page, created by clicking on a button and typing, are listed sensibly in reverse chronology – like a pile of papers on one's desk, but much neater. That's it – no manuals, no arcane commands. Like Google's Spartan home page, it's so simple you can't do anything wrong – and so addictively easy to use that one customer calls it "Basecrack."

Like "Next-Door Neighbors"

CHELSEA EXECS HAD their doubts at first. Chief Executive Howard S. "Howdy" Holmes is intensely hands-on, preferring to see photos and even minute retouches in person. Dubious of Bird's promise that Basecamp would substitute for in-person visits, he hesitated to hire a consultant based 650 miles away, in White Plains, N.Y. But R.Bird's design ideas won him over.

The doubts soon dissolved. "It quickly became apparent we could do a lot with the Web," Kennedy says. Instead of hopping a plane every time they wanted to see a new design wrinkle, Chelsea folks could view crystal-clear PDF files of mockups on-line, often while talking on the phone about tiny alterations they wanted. Such exchanges, which used to take as much as two months, now took two minutes.

The service even left room to play pranks. At one point, Holmes took pains to describe a tiny detail of a box design, referring to a piece of a muffin as looking like "as Scotty dog on top of a hockey stick." Afterwards, R.Bird Creative Director Joseph Favata posted a notation in the workspace: "Richard is concerned that the likeness of the BTK killer running down the street with the dagger may cause a drop in sales. (Look at the full muffin while standing on your head with one eye closed.)"

It all paid off. Kennedy estimates that by using Basecamp, Chelsea slashed the overall time to complete the massive redesign project from at least two years to about eight months. Says Kennedy: "The Web-based file sharing made it seem like [we] were next-door neighbors." Moreover, says Bird, "Decisions are made more quickly, and I definitely spend less time managing the communications of the project. We can spend more time creating."

Not all the people who work at Bird's clients have made the switch. Instead, they cling to e-mail and the phone – to Bird's clear irritation. "It's 300% more work" for his firm and clients to manage projects without the new technologies, he nearly shouts at me. Problem is, it takes time and patience for people to get used to working differently. "Collaboration isn't something you can just throw over the wall to people," notes David Coleman, managing director of Collaborative Strategies.

Indeed, my adventure into Web collaboration suggests a number of lessons about how organizations can get people to try this stuff: 1) Keep it simple. 2) No, even simpler. 3) No matter how good the collaboration tool, you may have to knock some heads to force people out of old habits. 4) Leave room for what still works: Sometimes, nothing beats a phone call, a face-to-face meeting, or even (gasp) e-mail. But whether it's Basecamp, a wiki, or some other collaboration service, I think I've found one more think on the Web that I can't live without. ∎∎

KENNEDY A quick convert to collaborative Web services