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GM uses wiki to tell its story

By Andrew Analore

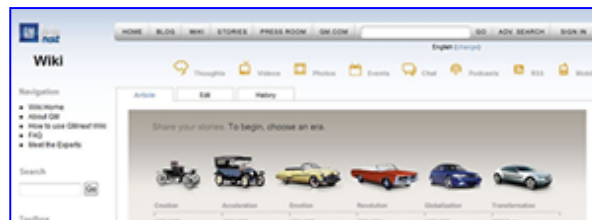
Interactive tools make telling the company's history a more touching and complete task

When it came time for General Motors to plan its 100th anniversary celebration, the world's largest automaker considered several pitches from authors eager to tell its story.

But the company chose another route, eschewing the traditional book project for a more high-tech option, an interactive "wiki" site that allows former employees and customers to discuss their memories of, and experiences with, GM.

What is a wiki? Basically, it's software that allows users to easily create, edit and link Web pages. Because they are easy to use, wikis have become popular as source for online communities, collaborative publications and company intranets. An example is [Wikipedia](#), the massive online encyclopedia that relies on content provided by users.

Launched in February, GM's wiki, hosted on its [GMnext.com](#) site, has already garnered more than 70,000 entries, including articles, photos



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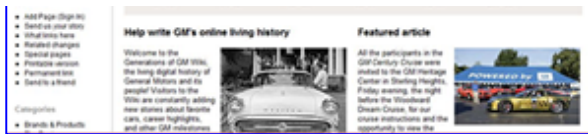



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and video. The stories range from personal experiences [working at a plant](#)—or being laid off at one—to fond memories of GM vehicles, such as the [57 Chevy](#).



They tell the story of the company in a more complete way than any author could ever hope to do, says Christopher Barger, GM's director of global communication technology.

“Who better to tell the story of our company than those people who actually made the story?” Barger asks. “The best advocates we can have for our company and our perspective are the employees who actually know what they are talking about. “

And unlike a history book, a wiki isn't fixed in time. GM hopes that the project will continue as a “living history” of the company with the continual addition of new information.

One potential problem with the wiki approach is that the ability of users to create new content leaves the door open for misinformation—deliberate or otherwise. GM has tried to address that issue through a moderating scheme that focuses on a set of “[Rules of the Road](#),” which encourage users to cite sources wherever possible and warns against the posting of information that is copyrighted or potentially libelous.

But the openness of wikis is also strength. Online communities often become self-regulating, with readers and subject-matter experts challenging misinformation or providing alternative perspectives on events. That's the approach that GM has taken. Additionally, the company has provided some structure for posts through the use of a timeline that outlines company milestones and the creation of categories such as “[Brands &](#)

Want a wiki?

Several off-the-shelf options exist for companies that want to start their own wikis with a minimum of hassle. Three sites worth checking out are:

1. [MediaWiki](#) (Billed as the most popular wiki software on the Web, it's the backbone for the Wikipedia Web site.)
2. [TikiWiki](#) (A site designed for collaborators that provides access to features such as online discussion forums and an image gallery.)

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From a corporate communications perspective, the GM wiki serves two major functions.

3. [Docuwiki](#) (Because it simplifies the creation of structured content, this may be a good option for small and medium-sized businesses.)

First, the interactive technology has helped engage people who might otherwise have taken little notice of the 100-year anniversary. “We’ve had more than 70,000 people tell a piece of the story,” Barger says. “I can guarantee you we weren’t going to sell 70,000 copies of a coffee-table book.”

Perhaps more important, the wiki is helping to train GM’s employees and retirees to use online communication tools. That’s important because GM has begun rolling out those tools within the company as a way for employees to more quickly and easily exchange information and share their expertise with employees in offices around the world.

The idea, Barger says, is to “flatten the bureaucracy and hierarchy out and build the tools that will allow people to interact with each other or communicate with each other on their own.”

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