
Case 3**Mozilla's Crowdsourcing Mystique¹**

- 1 There's a cool new video player in the Firefox Web browser that Mozilla released in 2009. But the onscreen buttons used to control it are too small for some visually impaired users to see. So Ken Saunders, a 41-year-old, legally blind volunteer for Mozilla, took it upon himself to create a tool that makes the player easier to use for people with vision problems. As the maker of the Firefox Web browser relies on volunteer developers, such for-profit companies as Google, Microsoft, and LinkedIn strain to copy the Mozilla model in some profitable fashion.
- 2 Saunders is among hundreds of people who donate time and skills to *Mozilla*, the Mountain View (Calif.) company that releases Firefox and other open-source software. Even as Mozilla's internal staff has grown to 250, from 15 in 2005, an army of volunteers still contributes about 40% of the company's work, which ranges from tweaks to the programming code to designing the Firefox logo.
- 3 How Mozilla channels those efforts is a model for a growing number of companies trying to tap into the collective talents of large pools of software developers and other enthusiasts of a product, brand, or idea. "There's structure in it," says Mike Beltzner, who runs Firefox. "But at the same time you allow people to innovate and to explore and [give them] the freedom to do what they want along those edges—that's where innovation tends to happen in startling and unexpected ways."
- 4 At Firefox, Beltzner calls it "leading from behind." His team makes only the highest, direction-setting decisions, such as the date each new version of Firefox has to ship. It's up to Mozilla staff and volunteers to meet those deadlines through a process of identifying specific tasks that need to be done and accomplishing them. A system of recognition has formed among volunteers, who can be designated as "module owners" and given authority over certain areas, such as the layout.

LINKEDIN QUERY VEXED A LOT OF USERS

- 5 Companies would like to follow the examples of Mozilla and online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which relies on unpaid contributors, as well as Linux, the open-source operating system developed by programmers who work for no pay. "There's no easy way to copy Mozilla," says Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. "But I do think that companies are increasingly going to look for ways to motivate their users to be participants."
- 6 Not all of these efforts go smoothly. In June, business networking site LinkedIn² polled 12,000 of its users who had identified themselves as translators to find out what would motivate them to help translate the site's content into other languages. While 18% said they would do it "for fun" and about half of the respondents wanted some form of recognition, many took umbrage at the request.³ The American Translators Association⁴ even sent a letter

¹ "Mozilla's Crowdsourcing Mystique," by Douglas McMillian, *BusinessWeek*, July 1, 2009. © 2009 McGraw-Hill Companies, Reprinted by Permission.

² www.Linkedin.com.

³ http://www.businessweek.com/the_thread/blogspotting/archives/2009/06/everything_migh.html.

⁴ www.atanet.org.

to LinkedIn's CEO calling the aim of the survey "misguided" and "troubling." Company spokeswoman Kay Luo says LinkedIn wasn't trying to solicit free labor. "Our intention was to survey our members to see what level of interest there was," she says.

- 7 Google recently came under comparable criticism from artists after issuing an open call to use their work as decorative skins for the company's Web browser. Google wasn't willing to pay, but emphasized the opportunity for exposure. "We believe these projects provide a unique and exciting opportunity for artists to display their work in front of millions of people," the company said in a statement.

A VOLUNTEER HELPS BOOST PRIVACY

- 8 Getting people to donate labor may be easier for Mozilla, which operates under a nonprofit umbrella foundation. Still, the Mozilla model holds lessons for a broad range of companies. "The profit motive wouldn't matter if the company is committed to fostering community and openness," says Kevin Gerich, a Web development manager at International Data Group who has contributed to Mozilla on and off since 2002.
- 9 One of the biggest breakthroughs in the newest version, Firefox 3.5, came from an outside contributor. The organization wanted to include a feature to let users surf the Web without recording their history in the browser, but abandoned the idea when its developers couldn't get it to work. With the deadline approaching, a volunteer came up with a plan for such a feature that Beltzer describes as "absolutely perfect." A private browsing mode made it into the release.
- 10 The leader in Web browsers, Microsoft's Internet Explorer, also has a privacy mode, but it doesn't include certain functions that Firefox thought up, such as the ability to retroactively erase browsing history from a particular site. Analysts say ingenuity like that is helping Mozilla get an edge in the browser wars.⁵ "Right now Mozilla definitely has some momentum," says Sheri McLeish, an analyst at Forrester. "They're not in it for profit, but their notion of what they're providing resonates with a lot of people." In May, Firefox's share of the browser market rose to 22.5%, from 19% a year earlier, according to data tracker Net Applications.⁶ Internet Explorer's share slid more than 7%, to 65.5%.
- 11 Shirky, who has spent several years researching collaboration in technology, says people tend to contribute to organizations or causes like Mozilla for three reasons: It aligns with their interests, they can get recognition, and they can meet other people doing it. While just about anyone can find an activity that accomplishes the first two, the Internet has played a key role in providing the third by helping people volunteer while widening their network. "If you talk to people about these collaborative communities, over and over you hear: 'I found all these other people who are interested in what I'm interested in,'" Shirky says.
- 12 That's true of Mozilla volunteer Saunders, a resident of Acushnet, Mass. In the past four years, as he's contributed to features that make Firefox more accessible to people with disabilities, Saunders has interacted daily with like-minded volunteers from Australia, Estonia, and Michigan. He notes, "We're co-workers, so to speak."

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⁵ http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/apr2007/tc20070405_395663.htm.

⁶ http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/mar2009/tc20090311_813488.htm; and www.netapplications.com.