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Everyone's an Editor as Wiki Fever Spreads to Shopping Sites

By BOB TEDESCHI

MILLIONS of people have lent their wisdom — or their perceived wisdom, at least — to Wikipedia's online articles, helping to make it one of the more talked-about Web sites in recent years. Now Amazon.com and the people who built the online advertising pioneer DoubleClick are hoping millions more will wax authoritative about toasters, fondue pots and lawn mowers.

ShopWiki.com, developed by two DoubleClick founders, officially introduced its site last week after several months of testing, while Amazon pulled the "beta" tag off its own wiki offering earlier this month (Amazon's ProductWikis — or invitations to write them — are found on product pages below customer reviews). Both take a page from Wikipedia, where online denizens may write on any subject and also overwrite anyone else's comments if they think they can do better, or if they are just feeling ornery.

A wiki, as defined by Wikipedia, is a "type of Web site that allows anyone visiting the site to add, to remove, or otherwise to edit all content, very quickly and easily." The name is drawn from a Hawaiian term meaning quick or fast, Wikipedia says.

Given the rapid proliferation of this technology in other corners of the Web, it is hardly surprising that wikis have made their way onto shopping sites. PBWiki.com, JotSpot, WetPaint and many others have in the last year started services that let people create their own wikis. Internet Brands Inc., which owns CarsDirect.com, announced last week that it had purchased two wiki-heavy travel information sites, WikiTravel.com and World66.com.

The question for ShopWiki, of course, is whether people actually care enough about consumer goods not only to write something about them, but also to edit what others have written. With Internet executives throwing wikis into every corner of cyberspace to see if they will stick, though, perhaps a better question would be, why not shopping sites?

Wikipedia obliges its contributors to keep their opinions to themselves or face editing by staff members. Both ShopWiki and the Amazon wiki want contributors to tread a similar line; this distinguishes the genre from, say, the familiar product reviews that users submit to Amazon and other shopping sites.

"These should be written from the point of view of a really great salesperson," said Kevin P. Ryan, ShopWiki's chief executive and a former chief executive of DoubleClick. "It should be totally objective, like, 'Tell me in three minutes what I should be thinking about when it comes to buying refrigerators.'"

If that sounds rather subjective to some, Mr. Ryan adds this clarification. "What we don't want is for manufacturers to be able to write a section in a way that biases you toward their products," he said. "If it's something like 'all cameras stink except for Canons,' we'll take that out."

ShopWiki aims to compete squarely with comparison shopping sites like Shopping.com, which is owned by eBay; Shopzilla.com, a unit of E. W. Scripps; and PriceGrabber.com, an Experian site. Those sites, based on their selling prices in the past year, are worth between $475 million and $685 million each.

ShopWiki, with headquarters in New York, maintains a database of roughly 60 million items from more than 120,000 online stores that it scans regularly. People type in a particular item, like toasters, and receive a long list of product options.

Unlike wiki features on other sites, initial entries are written not by amateurs but by staff writers. "On things like technology products especially, we wanted someone with more expertise to kick things off," Mr. Ryan said, adding that six staff writers "help with quality."

As for whether people will care enough about products to contribute, Mr. Ryan predicted they would.

"All of us have our own little thing we're into," he said. "Mine is Ping-Pong. I don't need 1,000 people coming to the Ping-Pong area of the site to make it work. If there are three people in the country who read it and comment on it, we're in good shape."

Amazon's ProductWiki feature, which it started testing in November, has generated more than 4,500 entries of varying length and quality. According to Andrew Herdener, an Amazon spokesman, the site relies on users to report wikis that are offensive or irrelevant, or those that either condemn or lavish praise on an item. Such a loose system of editorial oversight can diminish the quality of the postings at times. A ProductWiki of the Xbox 360 last week, for instance, devolved into a debate over the game system's merits in comparison to the Sony PlayStation; by Saturday, the entry had been edited to a standard wiki format.

Nonetheless, the feature "helps customers make informed purchase decisions," Mr. Herdener said. "It's going well. Customers really seem to like it, and are becoming more and more involved in refining the wikis."

ShopWiki, meanwhile, does not make money on sales that may result from customers who click to other sites. Rather, Mr. Ryan and his co-founder, Dwight Merriman, will stay true to their business roots and sell ads for products related to a consumer's search.

Chris Shipley, an analyst with Guidewire Group, a technology consulting firm based in Las Vegas, said that shopping sites might not be a good fit for wikis, given these sites' inclination to steer comments in a direction they felt was appropriate rather than letting the community decide.

"When you tell a community they can only say these sorts of things and at this volume, it doesn't work," Ms. Shipley said. "If you don't let people be people and be real, they'll just go somewhere else."

Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia.org, noted that wiki-centric communities were difficult to cultivate. "You're seeing a lot of people throwing up a wiki and saying 'Oooh, now we'll magically get all this stuff,'" Mr. Wales said. "But it's not about the software."

Mr. Wales announced last month that he had received $4 million in venture funding from, among others, Marc Andreessen, best known as a founder of Netscape, and the venture firms Bessemer Venture Partners and the Omidyar Network to fund his for-profit Web site, Wikia.com. On that site, authors collaborate on topics ranging from the Muppets to poker, often with more of a fan-club tone than the more clinical approach of Wikipedia's contributors.

That tone is a result of what the site's contributors want, not what Mr. Wales or other Wikia executives prescribe.

"You really have to take a stance where you're guiding the principles of the community rather than micromanaging them," he said. "You really have to respect the communities, not just say that."