

An Interview with Jack Herrick, Founder Of WikiHow

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of The Social Media Bible, published by John Wiley & Sons, the largest book ever written on the subject of Social Media, and today we are here with Jack Herrick, the founder and CEO of wikiHow. How cool is that! And we will be speaking a little about Social Media and also about wikiHow and wiki's, so let's get started!

Jack, can you give us a little background about who you are, wikiHow, how it got started, what a wiki is, please?



JH: Sure. Well, my name is Jack Herrick. I noticed in the introduction you called me the CEO of wikiHow. I actually don't go by that; you know a CEO is a pretty lofty title for a three-person company. So I just prefer the title, Founder. But let me give you a little background about wikiHow.

With wikiHow our goal was to build the world's largest, highest quality how-to manual and we had wiki-collaboration to do so. It's very similar to Wikipedia. The easy way to think about wikiHow is: Wikipedia is a wiki-encyclopedia and wikiHow is a wiki-How-to manual.

LS: Umm. That's pretty cool. And by the way I've got to tell you that ever since you guys published a widget, I mean, this is going back at least a year or two or more, every one of my Google home pages on all of my computers have the wikiHow, and I start my day (I'm not kidding you) every single day, by looking at your wikiHow, looking at the lists that come up, and actually clicking over.



I've learned so much stuff; it's so much fun.

JH: It's pretty interesting, isn't it? It's amazing the variety of information, the type of information and the quality of information we get using the wiki method. It's been really eye-opening for me. Like when I started wikiHow, I wasn't exactly sure what was going to happen. I wanted to build this how-to manual and all its different topics. But the wiki method is really amazing. I've been amazed seeing what type of information people are writing about. It's definitely veered away from the traditional how-to manuals at this point.

We have things about relationships, about all the how-to topics you'd expect to find. How to fix your car, how to solve problems in your computer. But we've gotten totally different types of topics, really wild things. It's really expanding the definition of what a how-to manual can be.

LS: When you have that moment of inspiration and you say, "I'm going to do this!" What prompted you? What gave you that moment of inspiration?

JH: Well, I've always really been interested in building a really big how-to manual and I'll give you the long story here.

So, I owned the Psych-e How, which is sort of the web 1.0 version of the how-to manual. And e-How's story is this. They got started in 1999 during the boom and they raised a ton of money from venture capitalists. They

had 200 employees and they were writing this massive how-to manual and at the time I had nothing to do with that company. I was doing something totally different. I knew the founder of the e-How and always admired the company. I thought it was a great idea.

Unfortunately, when the downturn hit (the first internet downturn) he went into bankruptcy and had to lay off all their 200 employees and basically the company went into a deep freeze. It was bought out by another venture-capital-funded company, called IT-Exchange, and they tried to nurse the site along and find a business model that would work and they also failed to do that. It wasn't profitable and they couldn't get it working. And they were about to shut the site off and it was a company I had heard about and I really liked their site. I didn't want to see it go down.

At the time I was working at another company, but I hated to see How die, and so a friend of mine and I got together and we bought the site and we were both working full-time jobs, but we sort of brought the site back to life.

We hired a couple of writers, we started working our way and fixed lots of bugs on the old site and it started to work; and on a very, very small cost-basis we were able to get the site profitable and it was working quite well. We were pretty excited about it.

But when I was doing that, I became a little disillusioned with the How. We hired writers but what we found was you cannot hire writers to cover all the world's topics in all the world's languages. So, for example, I could hire someone to write about mutual funds, Viagra, you name any high key-word, high TCP key-word topic, and it was a very profitable thing to have someone write about it.

But to have someone write about some of the really obscure things, there is no business model for it; and it really wasn't my vision to have a How-to manual that was really only covering high-key TCP topics. I really wanted to have a how-to manual to cover every single imaginable how-to topic, and also in multiple languages. And you just weren't going to get there with this professional writer model. At least you weren't going to get there in a high quality method. You could take and put in schlock but that wasn't what I wanted to do either.

First I was sort of puzzled about how we can accomplish this goal and in the process, sort of taken around the internet like many people, stumbled upon Wikipedia and was just amazed at the quality of information, the breadth of information and as I learned more and more about how it was written, I became even more impressed about what they were doing. So I started thinking, you know, if we could take the same wiki model and apply it to write a how-to manual. And so I tried that one. My engineer, Travis Daryl and I sort of clevered away, and in late 2004 tried to import the media wiki software and transform it to a how-to manual, something that would be better fitting for a How-to manual. And then we launched wikiHow on the anniversary of Wikipedia's birthday on January 15, 2005.

LS: Wow! Congratulations. (Laughter) You had mentioned that while you don't know so much, maybe not that much about Social Media, but that's what this is! I mean, that's what is exciting me. That's why a contacted you to do this interview. Because one of the things that I've learned when writing The Social Media Bible was that I realized that I'm not an expert in everything that's Social Media. I know a lot about a lot, I know more about some. But what I realized in my role in producing the book was not really being the expert and writing every single one of the chapters, even though I am writing the chapters; it's really about bringing

together people like you and the experts that have very vertical, intense knowledge and really what I call myself is an aggregator, more so than an expert.

JH: That's interesting. Well, you must have learned a lot about wiki's in the past couple of years?

LS: Well, I think in your world you're an aggregator of experts in very, very vertical markets.

JH: Yes, that's true. The wiki model: I've viewed my role as creating a platform to allow people to create and share information. And I myself am not writing information or having much of a guiding hand in what's actually happening; I'm just trying to create a platform that will allow the information to be shared, created and improved upon.

LS: So, the big question I always have when you talk about user-generated content, "How do you herd the cats?"

JH: Well, see, with wiki's there's nothing really specific out there as I herd the cats, to use that expression. Umm, wiki's really work as...I think there are a lot of people out there who want to do something, and a wiki allows you to put a certain how-to together and one place to do it. And so, wikiHow attracts a group of people who are as passionate as me about building a large, shared how-to manual and it allows them to do that. So it works through its virtuous cycle. When I first started wikiHow, the very first month, we had it up in January, 2005 we had over 2,000 people visit the site, and that was great.

And those 2,000 people may be five or 10 people actually wrote an article or edited something. And so there really wasn't much going on at the site in the very early days, but it works in a virtuous cycle where the next month you had these five articles, or 10 articles and those brought some people in from search engine traffic, and what have you. And some of the people read the articles and said, "Hey, this article is not very good. I can do a better job."

And they pressed "edit" and they improved the content and then the content got better and maybe that content moved up in the search engine rankings, and that brought more people in who've also said, "Wow, I can do better than this!" And they pressed "edit" and improved the content and the cycle keeps going. And the cycle is still running today on wikiHow.

LS: For those who don't know, can you just kind of give us a summary or a definition of what a wiki actually is?

JH: wiki is a site (this is a simple definition) that anyone can edit. So if you are going around the internet, most sites go to your read content, but you generally cannot edit it. You can often at almost any site now leave a comment and say, like, "Wow, this page is really good, or this page is really bad", or something more civil like that. But a wiki is where you can actually edit and completely change the information.

LS: Okay. One of the things through these interviews I am learning is that some people have very strong business models, and how they actually monetize their work. And many actually don't have any idea; they're just out there doing it for free. Where in that spectrum do you fit? Do you have a business model that actually covers your overhead?

JH: Yes, we have. I say we have the simplest, minimalist business model you can get! We show Google ads on the pages of our articles. So if you go to any wikiHow page, you will see some ads by Google and if you click on one of those ads you'll make a very small amount of money. But, fortunately there's enough people visiting wikiHow now that we can cover our costs. For the first couple of years we weren't, but at this point we are.

And we've been very minimalistic. We do not even show ads to registered users and in fact a lot of people turn the ads off if they don't want to see them. So it's pretty low-key.

LS: Yes, that is pretty cool.

JH: It's only a small cost, so it works.

LS: Yes, keep your overhead low and your revenue high. That's a good business model. One of the things that I'm learning about wiki's is the wide-spread application of user-generated content and I just heard some recent stories about Fortune 500 companies actually creating their own wiki's for in-house knowledge base (it use to be called) where all of the employees can contribute on a particular subject, so that it becomes a training manual. It becomes the sole source of information for that particular company.

If somebody wanted to get involved in a wiki, would you recommend it? Upsized or downsized, does it make any sense?

JH: Absolutely! Every day that goes by it becomes an increasingly larger scan of wiki's. When I first described a wiki, the very simplest definition is "something that anyone can edit". The more complex definition, as you get more into wiki, is there is a whole philosophy around it and some of the elements of the philosophy are it's done in good faith with everyone's contributions. It seems that people are here to help build knowledge and knowledge comes in many different shapes and forms, and from different people who you would expect it from; and when people collaborate together and build something, you can really build something tremendously larger than any one person can build on their own.

LS: Synergy!

JH: And I think that is definitely happened in the case of wikiHow. It definitely happened in the case of Wikipedia and I've also talked to people who are working at Fortune 500 companies and hearing those same sorts of stories you heard. People, within the enterprise, are turning on wiki's and finding that the knowledge in the organization is far more than people at the top would have assumed. And allowing this sort of "bottoms up" collaboration can happen on a wiki, produces knowledge that is impressive; and I think more organizations are going to try and figure this out.

In fact, one company that I've talked to is the U.S. State Department. They have a wiki internally called the Diplopedia which runs on Wikipedia software just like wikiHow and Wikipedia. So it's been a great resource for the State Department.

LS: That's a pretty interesting application within the government, actually them creating their own wiki.

JH: Right. I think the CIA has one, too.

LS: But we're not allowed to talk about it.

JH: We're not allowed to talk about that one! Oh, yeah!

LS: Another question that comes to mind is how do you regulate the quality and the content, because no matter which ones I read, they all have the same format, they're very informative, they have photographs, step-by-step instructions. Who puts all that work into making sure that you have constant quality?

JH: Let me give you a multi-part answer to this question because it is complex.

The first answer is we have multiple lines of defense in the wiki community there are thousands of people who contribute to wikiHow over any given month; and within that group there is a much smaller and tight group of people that will number in the 100's, people who I call the "Hard Core WikiHow Contributors" and they are responsible for making sure the quality stays high.

Every edit that goes to wikiHow is looked at by another human, and it is a volunteer who looks at "edits" and says, "It is good", or "It is bad", or "I'm going to check this... am I going to send it out, or am I going to "edit" this "edit" to make it even better."

And so that's happening all the time, all day long in real time. Hundreds of people around the world are helping out. So that's our first line of defense. The second line of defense is the reverse! So if we miss something or volunteer editors miss something or the volunteer "Hard Core Contributors" miss something, then RigidSoft will often catch something; and if we make an error or let something slip in, readers will find it.

And one of the things that is pretty exciting about wiki's is we are finding more and more ways to improve quality. You may notice at the bottom of every wiki page now there is a "Is this article accurate: yes/no button" and the people vote on this thing, so it allows us to percolate pages that might have accuracy problems at the top and we work on them and improve them. So this really allows situations where you would think there would be complete chaos where we allow anyone to edit. We do not even require people to log in or tell us any information about themselves whatsoever and yet with allowing anyone to edit wiki creates a high quality resource out there.

LS: That's an exciting philosophy that you have about wiki and I think it also applies, really, to the Social Media in the entire industry. One of the things that also I found exciting about what you just said is that the people themselves police the articles. That people will look at it and point out inaccuracies and contribute. And they're all doing it really in a positive way, because they want to make a contribution. Do you see most people who participate are really passionate and positive about what you are doing?

JH: Yes. I mean if you are not passionate about the shared how-to-manual, you not going to be working on it. And so the people who are active on wiki are all as passionate as I am about it. Otherwise, they would not be spending their free time doing it.

And that works because we license everything under a "Creative Commons" license. All of our software is "open-source" so we are really sharing this resource back with the world. And that's what makes people do it, or one of the things that people will trust, that other contributions will stick around, even if I don't stick around.

LS: And you use that key word, “trust”. The “trusted” network, the trust and wisdom of the crowds; the “crowd-sourcing”.

JH: Yes, although I do not think readers have much trust in the “wisdom of the crowds”, per se. You know, I think if anything there is a group of people out there who are willing to trust the wisdom of the crowd. Maybe they have read the book and they understand the concept, understand that these kinds of things do work, but I think the vast majority of readers are actually quite skeptical of the wisdom of the crowds, and quite skeptical in user-generated content and wiki’s specifically, because we are so open.

I notice all the time where an article on wikiHow will be really, really criticized and there is a lot of negative comments from readers who think that an article, written in the fashion we write it, just cannot be accurate. But if you go and do the research and look into the article, it will actually end up being much better than articles written on traditional, professionally published websites.

So I think there is actually a large element of distrust, so we have to get across; we have to cross chasms with our readers to prove that we actually have quite a good information source.

LS: Yeah, and that is a really good point and I think you are absolutely right. I think most people do distrust the wisdom of the crowds, as well. I mean, look, we’ve had 6,000 years of history to show that the wisdom of the crowd isn’t necessarily always good. But the cool thing is, though, that when you are talking about a very specific subject there are incredible vertical-subject experts on that, and if they are willing to take the time to contribute and perfect it, really, it’s being more policed by the individual who knows the subject matter the best, as opposed to just tossing it out to the crowd masses.

JH: That is absolutely correct! That is absolutely correct!

You know I could tell you, from having done the wiki model and also having done the professionally edited, professionally generated content model, that the quality of our content is better than you might have had in previous incarnations, in my previous sites. So I really think that it does work, but it takes, you know, it takes a long time to get the process working right.

LS: And a good formula!

JH: Yes.

LS: I did noticed one time that I did make an entry into Wikipedia and I think the term is “spanked pink” (Laughter) because there was some inaccuracies in what I thought and that what I believed was true, and it was amazing how people from all over the world came and, “No, you’re not exactly right there. It is really more like this and here’s a link to show you some more information.”

JH: Yeah, wikiHow, Wikipedia are not perfect all the time, for sure. There is no way I’m going to say that all the articles on it are perfect and great, because that’s definitely not the case. It’s a process that works over time. And generally the articles on wikiHow do not always start out great; in fact they generally start out pretty lousy. But it is a process that allows people to edit and allows people to improve the pages over time, and that’s

allowing our community of passionate editors to improve the pages. So it makes the content better over time. But, you know, it can be a really long process.

LS: Where do you see wikiHow five years from now? What do you think is the ultimate goal here?

JH: So wikiHow is trying to build up the world's largest, highest quality how-to manual and we want it to be in English and we want it to be in multiple languages. So right now we are, well I'll give you some updated stats. Right now we are about 40,000 articles read every month by about 12.5 million unique readers, which makes us "cast" as the 149th most popular site in the United States.

LS: Congratulations!

JH: And we grow every month. In five years I think we are going to be much larger and you know we're going to be getting much closer to our goal. We are nowhere near the vision that we have right now of a "how-to manual" with every topic, every page being the most accurate and up to date and high quality information on that topic available. We are nowhere near that goal, but in five years we are going to be significantly closer.

LS: Well, even now, 40,000 articles is a pretty good step in that direction!

JH: Yeah, we're getting there. And of those 40,000 are some of which are really, really good and some of which are not very good, at this point. So it is a process that, little by little, will get there.

LS: That's cool. That is totally cool!

JH: And the beauty of our model is that we can take a very long-term goal and long-term view on this. It is something that I really think is going to take decades to really build it out to where we want it to be. But we are working on building "The World's How-To Manual" and that is going to take some time.

LS: And that's pretty cool. I like that slogan there, "The World's How-To Manual", the accumulation of all the knowledge of the world on "How-to". I think that's an admirable goal.

JH: Yeah.

LS: And I have got to agree. I mean I love this stuff that's in there, so I'm going to support you any way I can.

JH: Right!

LS: Is there anything else that you can tell our listeners about wikiHow, about what you are doing, where you're going, what your philosophy is, just anything you want to add here?

JH: I would hope people, editors, come on and give wikiHow a try. It's a very different experience than most Social Media sites; I think you'll find. You know, the average Social Media site is still pretty much the early days for Social Media on the internet. But when I go and use Social Media sites they feel a little stilted and, in some ways, non-human to me. The interactions seem just "odd". I've become friends with people I've met once at a conference and things like this on my Social Media sites, where at wikiHow the interface you get from working on it is a little more "human".

You are really collaborating with people and it will be all the sort of things that collaboration is about. You know, sometimes you'll disagree with people and sometime you will love to work with someone at times. You know, by forcing people to working on the same page with each other, you find you learn more about yourself, you learn more about interacting with others, and it is a really "fun" experience.

So I would hope people would give editing a try. And, that's about it! That's what it does.

LS: One of the thoughts, too, that came to mind is that I'm a real strong fan of strategic partnering. Have you considered it? I'm just tossing this quick idea out; partnering with "This Old House" and segmenting and feeding just how-to tips on home repair? Would that be something that would work?

JH: Yeah, you know it is something we have not done much of, because we are just limited as an organization of what we can take on right now.

LS: Sure.

JH: But it's a good idea! Yeah, it is something we should be doing more of. And it's something, as I have more time or if other volunteers want to take this task on, it would be fun to check out.

LS: Yeah, it would seem to me that if I had a vertical site that is about "how-to" like This Old House, or many of the other general topics like crafting sites, that it would be kind of cool to be able to pull by category from you database into my website. I would love to partner with you! (Laughter)

JH: Yeah.

LS: And then the Part B of that question is DIY and some of the others; do you consider them or do they consider you a competitor, or is there any overlap here?

JH: Well, there are a ton of DIY sites on the internet right now. It's a very "hot" item for whatever reason. And, you know, I look at this as though we're building a "how-to" manual, The World's How-To Manual. It's our view for decades and we are not really building a business model which is, "Hey we're going to have to do this." We are something that within the next year we are not going out of business. And I think all these new sites are focused on going bigger and going home.

I think our views are so totally different from those other sites that I don't really look at them as like, "Oh, these are competitors. These are guys we've got to keep away." In fact a lot of the employees of these other sites have logged on to wikiHow and write articles on wikiHow that link back to their own sites. And we are totally happy with that!

LS: That's clever, sure!

JH: You know it creates more knowledge for us and it creates some traffic for them. That's great for them, and as long as it is meeting our goals of building The World's How-To Manual, then we are all on board!

LS: And I love that. You just summarized it perfectly! I mean, that really is what Social Media is all about. It is total collaboration, not just with users but the people that are trying to build things. I love that about this industry.

JH: Yeah!

LS: So, Jack, can you tell us where people can go to find out more information about wikiHow, I mean (Laughter)....

JH: You can just go to www.wikiHow.com and just read around the site. We have a tour if you want to become a new user and learn a little about editing, or if you want to just, sort of, check out our articles just hit “random page” and you will learn all sorts of crazy stuff.

LS: (Laughter) that’s great! Well I would really like to thank Jack Herrick, the Founder of wikiHow, for being here today and sharing those amazing insights.

Really, Jack, thank you so much for being here today.

JH: Well, thanks for having me!

LS: This is cool!

This has been Lon Safko, the co-author of The Social Media Bible. Be sure to check out the other valuable social media tactics, tools and strategies that can be found in The Social Media Bible book and its companion website, www.thesocialmediabible.com.

For more information about me, Lon Safko, please by all means go to my website, www.lonsafko.com.

And, again Jack, thank your for being here today.

JH: Great! Thanks Lon.

LS: Thanks.