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ThoughtFarmer software was created at Openroad Communications under president Darren Gibbons (left) and vice-president Gordon Ross.

It's veni, vidi, wiki at Intrawest

Construction manager saves a bundle building a resort, then shares his how-to on corporate intranet

BY PETER WILSON
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Using tiles on the entrance to a new resort would have cost \$2 million.

But a Vancouver-based construction manager for Intrawest Placemaking — which builds resorts worldwide — had a better idea. He used shaped concrete, polished and finished for a better-than-tile appearance.

That saved Placemaking more than \$500,000.

Then the construction manager got the word out to the rest of the company by posting his experience to Placemaking's new everybody-is-an-editor intranet.

Soon the response was pouring in, said Darren Gibbons, president of Gastown's OpenRoad Communications, which, along with One Intranets, created the ThoughtFarmer software that powers the Placemaking intranet.

"Other construction managers saw what he had done there, asked him questions about it. He was able to

upload pictures and respond to the questions. Now quite a few other construction managers have used that information on their projects."

The idea to use wiki influences — where employers can post their own material and comment on what others post — came from Tracy Hutton, Placemaking's director of learning.

"It never concerned me that some of those might be controversial," said Hutton. "In fact, I'm always hoping that someone will rock the boat because I believe that's how progress is made."

She said she believes that chaos often produces good ideas, and that the best ideas and solutions just don't come from the top of the organization.

So if that means that someone in the 250-person organization posts a picture of a *Magnum P.I.*-era Tom Selleck and claims it's his photo — and sets off an avalanche of imitators — then so be it.

After all, the readership of the company's intranet is up more than tenfold since it was introduced.

And it still allows Placemaking executives to get their message across.

For example, during the time before the recent takeover of the Intrawest parent company by Fortress Investment Group LLC, Placemaking president, Drew Stotesbury — who, like everyone else in the company, has his own space on the intranet — was able to answer questions about the situation, rather than let employees stew about rumours.

As to be expected in any corporation, not all of the site is open to editing and there are restrictions. The human resources section, for example, where company policies are posted, can only be edited by human resources staff, said Hutton.

Overall, though, the intranet keeps the flow of information, current and relevant as well as entertaining.

"After all, you can't e-mail everybody," said OpenRoad vice-president Gordon Ross. "You're not going to spam the company with your big idea on how I saved half a million on tiles."

"Not everybody cares about that. But when the construction manager in Vancouver posts it, then a construction manager in Florida and one in

Nevada can read it and they're able to interact."

When Placemaking's Hutton decided she wanted a more open intranet she asked OpenRoad for advice.

"We evaluated the off-the-shelf products at that time and basically made the recommendation that there wasn't anything that met all their requirements."

The project was put on hold and then revived. In the interim ThoughtFarmer, which is now about to launch a second version, was developed.

Currently, OpenRoad is working with a British Columbia health care authority to create an intranet for 3,500 doctors and medical office assistants.

"For that project we're still using the same ability to contribute content, but the number of users who can edit content is smaller," said Gibbons. "The bulk of the content is actually secured and limited to a subset of users, but users, who happen to be doctors, still have the ability to go in and edit and upload the information."

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