The Content Wrangler
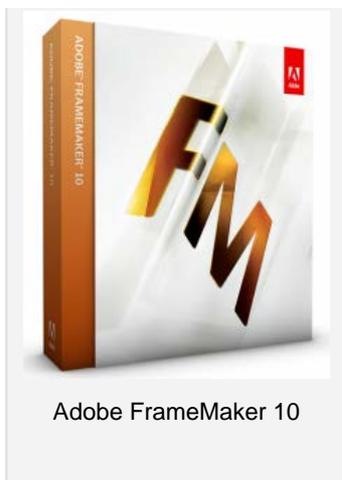
25 YEARS OF FRAMEMAKER: WHY THIS PRODUCT STILL "ROCKS" AFTER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY

By Scott Abel | Apr 7, 2011 | Technical Communication , Tools | 32 ⬚ | ⬚ ⬚ ⬚ ⬚ ⬚

by Maxwell Hoffmann , Director, Document Globalization Practice at Globalization Partners International

Adobe FrameMaker 10

This month (April 2011) FrameMaker turns 25 , just 3 months after the launch of a major new release, Adobe FrameMaker 10 . Over the years, FrameMaker has attracted many nicknames, from "industrial strength publishing" to "Word on steroids." Even phrases like "too good to be true" have been associated with the product.

None of these monikers have ever accurately categorized or captured the essence of this dynamic product. I was employee number 66 at Frame Technology (the company that invented FrameMaker) when it was barely 2 years old. Since a silver anniversary only comes along once in a lifetime, here are my observations on how this versatile product has evolved and continues to thrive well into the 21st Century.

Has it really been that long ago?

FrameMaker has been around since Ronald Reagan was in his second term as US President. Just how has this product stayed relevant and competitive during the vastly changing landscape of the past 25 years? Ironically, FrameMaker has achieved this with two goals that may seem in conflict: (a) staying highly focused on a targeted group of users and (b) being really powerful at doing lots of different things.

Early FrameMaker users were creating manuals with files that were often hundreds and sometimes thousands of pages long. High volume, high page-count, frequently revised content has always been targeted as the ideal project for FrameMaker. Since the earliest users of FrameMaker created highly complex documentation which required multiple presentation formats, advanced multi-purpose features were developed early in the product's life.

Keeping pace with the second decade of the 21st Century …

The latest version of FrameMaker, paired with RoboHelp 9 and other components of the Adobe Technical Communication Suite 3 make this mature product an ideal solution for (a) highly accessible DITA authoring , (b) authoring that can be swiftly and inexpensively integrated with CMS, (c) multi-channel output that is empowered for social media and even (d) scalable output to the "small screen"; eBooks for viewing on hand held devices and tablets .

The synergy between the far-sighted vision of FrameMaker's founders and Adobe's revolutionary workflow goals have had a great deal to do with FrameMaker's continued success. There could hardly be a more global product than FrameMaker; it is Unicode compliant, easily publishes huge projects in multiple languages, and product development is brilliantly (and quietly) managed from Adobe India . But more about that later; let's start with a brief tour of how FrameMaker was born and how it grew.

In the beginning, there was UNIX …

Multitasking and multichannel output is in FrameMaker's "DNA" because it was fortuitously born on a UNIX platform, not on the Mac or PC. In 1986, personal computers were usually limited to 512K of RAM, and a hard drive of only a few megs. Many Macs and PCs of that era were limited to floppy disc storage.

Desktop publishing applications developed on the Mac or PC in the mid-1980s did word processing or page layout , not both . For any readers born since Reagan left office, this may feel like a field trip to the Smithsonian Museum !

As a partner with Sun Microsystems , Frame Technology had access to multiple UNIX workstations for development. FrameMaker's first hardware platform had at least 2 megs of RAM, a 20 meg hard drive, and a multi-tasking UNIX OS that easily handled background activities (like printing) while word processing, page layout and graphics editing took place simultaneously in the foreground. The screen was large, and a simple, proprietary "desktop" made file management simple, visual and effective.

In the early years of FrameMaker's development, the UNIX workstation market (for publishing) was growing like gang busters. So early on, the product founders and pioneer engineers decided to make the code "portable" so it could easily be ported to various flavors of UNIX. Fairly early on, FrameMaker was ported to Mac, then to an early version of Windows. FrameMaker's incredibly advanced features (like conditional text for multi-versioning and what is still the world's best tables) literally seemed like a trip to Mars on smaller, personal computers "back in the day."
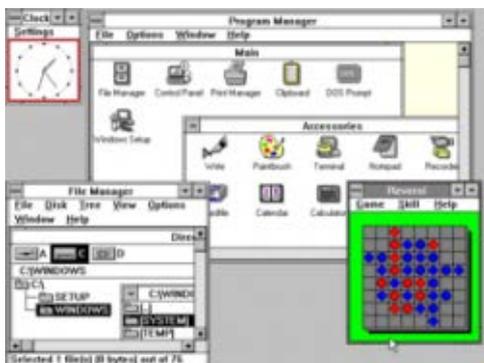
Many of the product's features were so far ahead of their time that it took several years for people to actually believe that the product demonstrations weren't "fake." A single template import could radically transform text formatting, auto numbering, page layout and more, in just a few seconds. While working at Frame Technology, I learned that the only way to get through to trade show audiences was to import the template in 3 stages (first layout, then text formats, then table formats) so potential users could "follow" with the process. The recommended technique was too much for most people to believe.

Ignorance is not bliss …

And this is where a lot of misconceptions about FrameMaker got started. Because the publishing engine was so radically ahead of its time, (and in many ways still is) there has always been an element of disbelief about FrameMaker's capabilities amongst some publishing "experts." If I had a dollar for every time someone told me, "Well, I can do that with Microsoft Word!" Well, yes, and I could build a ship in a bottle, but I don't think you'd want to watch me doing that.

In a way, it would a bit like being a car sales man trying to sell a car with newly invented automatic transmission shortly before WWII. Nearly any customer taking a 1940 Oldsmobile for a test drive would keep stepping on the floor out of habit, trying to find the clutch. There is no clutch; that's why we call it "automatic." In a similar vein, FrameMaker has automatically achieved dramatic publishing results without long used, familiar processes and tools.

Even early versions of FrameMaker completely eliminated tiresome steps from the publishing process. As an example, for well over 20 years, FrameMaker has automatically generated hyperlinks from target to source for generated Tables of Contents, Indices and cross-references. The binary file format was extremely stable, and users never had to "rebuild" broken cross-references or hyperlinks when upgrading to new releases.

The birth of "structured" FrameMaker …
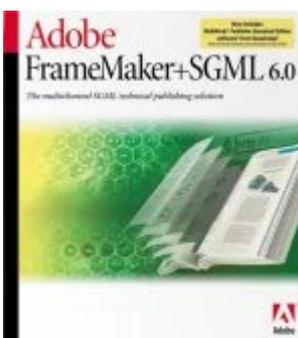
By the early 1990s FrameMaker became extremely popular with technical publications groups in aerospace and manufacturing. SGML and structured editing were high priorities for this crowd, and FrameMaker's founders put their brain trust of engineers to the millstone to come up with a solution. By 1992, a prototype of "FrameBuilder" was demonstrated to Frame Tech employees in one of our monthly "Pizza Fridays." It had an early forerunner of the "structure view" window still used in FrameMaker today. This prototype eventually became "FrameMaker+SGML" … a higher priced product that had robust SGML application capabilities.

Lucky for the rest of us, after Adobe's 1995 acquisition of FrameMaker, "FrameMaker+SGML" and "regular" FrameMaker were merged into one product with release 7.0. That release also marked the birth of "official" XML support, which has grown steadily over the past 9 years.

Fast forward to 1995, Adobe: the essential ingredient …

It can be argued that if FrameMaker was invented by the sharpest knife in the tech space drawer — Charles Corfield — the product was acquired and fostered by the smartest people in the publishing space, Adobe . It became clear early on that FrameMaker was a focused, niche publishing solution that would never have the mass sales potential of other Adobe products, which were aimed at a more densely populated, creative space. Still, Adobe recognized and respected FrameMaker's unique powers and value, and for the past 25 years no other product has emerged to rival FrameMaker's "accessible" set of power tools.

Rising on the crest of the mid 1990s technology boom and the explosive growth of the Internet, Adobe was the right company to acquire FrameMaker at the right time. Adobe was already the market-leader for nearly every tool in the creative space, (and page layout with PageMaker , but they did not have a full-fledged solution for hard-core, technical documentation. In a relatively short period of time, Adobe grasped both the significance of this technical market and its vast differences from the creative spaces inhabited by Photoshop, Illustrator and eventually InDesign .

Adobe India, which develops and manages many other Adobe technical solution products beyond the "creative" space, has done a brilliant job of meeting with countless users, listening to their strongest needs, and responding effectively to that input. Two years ago FrameMaker 9.0 introduced a true "Adobe" user interface, which makes the product far more accessible to new users, and users of other Adobe products. Adobe bundled a highly useful set of complimentary products with FrameMaker to offer the Technical Communication Suite. Adobe also introduced Adobe Community Help, an AIR-based platform that empowers users to push relevant technical content into FrameMaker's online Help. This not only gave FrameMaker and TCS users a greater sense of product ownership and involvement, it gave Adobe an hour-by-hour seismograph to monitor the swiftly evolving needs of today's publishing world. The impact of Facebook and other social networking "sharing" tools did not go unnoticed.

Even with DITA, some people just don't "get" FrameMaker…

True to its heritage of eliminating unnecessary steps, FrameMaker's approach to the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) was to collapse the workflow into a more manageable process. "DITA for the rest of us," some people called it. Ironically, this was sometimes a cause for criticism. No, FrameMaker does not rely upon tediously created style sheets to achieve robust formatting in an XML or DITA publishing workflow. Instead, any unstructured FrameMaker legacy document can become the seed for a structured FrameMaker template. Essentially, FrameMaker's proprietary formatting engine (which creates paragraph, character and table styles), provides any degree of complexity you may desire

in formatting. You are no longer reliant on expensive consultants or a "CSS guru" to achieve output from DITA that bears rich formatting.

The early advent of "FrameBuilder" put the foundation for XML into FrameMaker's DNA. Arguably, that one factor may be more responsible for the product's current success than any other product feature.
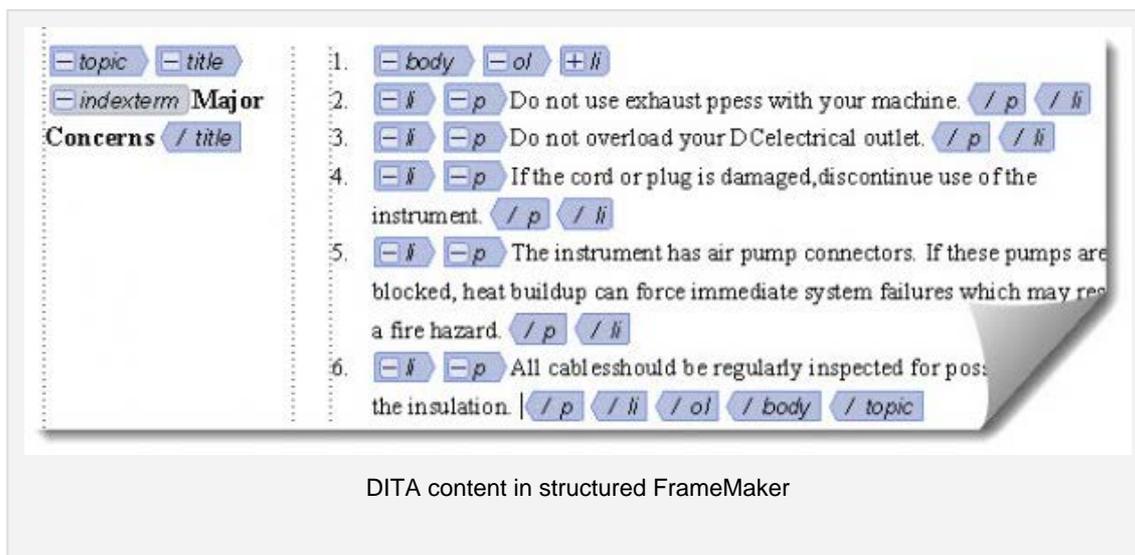
DITA content in structured FrameMaker

A brief word on this topic, although DITA is a "standard," customization is often required.   "Pure" DITA, with no modification, can create modest formatting for documents with relative complexity. But DITA's standard structured won't always accommodate transformations and intricate display of part numbers required in page headers or footers by Pharma and Biotech industries. Take a look at Adobe Evangelist Tom Aldous's recent video blog on Publishing Custom Structured XML With FrameMaker 10.

In the translation and localization industry, we work with many different document styles and workflows. But FrameMaker (unstructured or XML) is still the most common file format for complex, high page-count manuals (print or electronic) for regulated industries like medical devices and biotechnology. My company, Globalization Partners International   , has had extensive experience migrating customers from unstructured FrameMaker into XML/DITA. Our development for a major medical device manufacturer   , creating an XML-based FrameMaker workflow with no "round tripping" from *.fm to *.xml format, took less than 20% of the development time that would have been required by most "open source" DITA toolkit solutions. This may have something to do with why so many CMS/DITA consultants don't promote FrameMaker. (Watch for a future blog on this topic.)

FrameMaker 10 has made DITA authoring and development more accessible than ever. A new user interface allows even publishers with modest skill sets to become capable of modifying context-sensitive rules in the EDD (Element Definition Document) which can apply rules-based formatting, rather than simply marrying element names to paragraph tags.

To overcome the usual "disbelief" factor, Adobe has crafted some elegant, simple video demo/blogs that will quickly drive the point home. You may want to start with the very comprehensive Adobe

FrameMaker 10 and FrameServer 10 Reviewer's Guide, which also has numerous embedded video demos.

Here are just a few of the many Adobe video/blogs choose from:

- Do Rapid DITA Authoring in FrameMaker 10!
- Introducing Adobe Technical Communication Suite 3: Six Industry Trends Captured
- Adobe TV: New in: Adobe RoboHelp 9, Adobe 10 and TCS 3
- Adobe TV: FrameMaker channel

FrameMaker 10 has extended product functionality to full support of DITA 1.2, making referenced data and many other essential content ingredients available for swift content transformations. Although FrameMaker had powerful, proprietary multi-versioning available for over 20 years, through proprietary conditional text control, today's product can handle this in a more standard fashion through filtered attributes in DITA.

What's under the hood with FrameMaker 10?

Lack of space prevents a full product review combined with this silver anniversary retrospective on FrameMaker. But, working in the translation industry, we have our list of new key product features that we feel will even further reduce time and costs on multiple language projects. For a full summary of these features, click on the GPI blogs relating to FrameMaker and TCS3 listed below:

- 8 Ways Unstructured FrameMaker 10 helps Translation
- 6 Ways Structured FrameMaker 10 helps Translation
- How Adobe Technical Communication Suite 3 Helps Translation

Closing thoughts: FrameMaker's future …

At various times in past years there have been "urban legend" type rumors that Adobe was planning on "killing" FrameMaker. First PageMaker and later InDesign were wrongly identified as in-house products that would render FrameMaker obsolete. Any content creator from a tech pubs background immediately recognized how ludicrous such speculation was.

I've witnessed a steady progression of relevant product feature growth since I first used the product in 1988. Adobe's commitment to both FrameMaker and its intended user base has become increasingly evident over the year. Perhaps the strongest testament to FrameMaker's present and future health is Adobe's recent selection of Tom Aldous as Product Evangelist for Tech Comm Suite to replace a deservedly promoted RJ Jacquez . You couldn't find a better person for the job than Tom. I should know. He was my student 20 years ago.

"Tom, may the Force continue to be with you."

As you can see from the photos below, FrameMaker isn't the only thing that has changed over the past 25 years.

About the Author
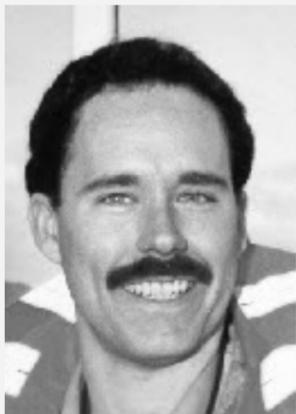
Maxwell Hoffmann,
the early years

Maxwell Hoffmann,
Today

Maxwell Hoffmann is Director, Document Globalization Practice at Globalization Partners International (GPI). He has over 14 years' experience in localization and leads GPI's Documentation Globalization Practice, helping clients produce and publish multilingual content in a cost-effective, consistent, and culturally correct manner. Designated an Adobe Community Expert in 2007 and a 2011 inductee to the Adobe Community Professional program as a recognized expert in FrameMaker, Maxwell is a former product marketing manager for FrameMaker. He has extensive experience as a practitioner and instructor in Adobe FrameMaker and DITA/XML, and has trained over 1,200 people. He was also designated one of the Top 25 Most Influential Content Strategists for 2010 by MindTouch and LavaCon .
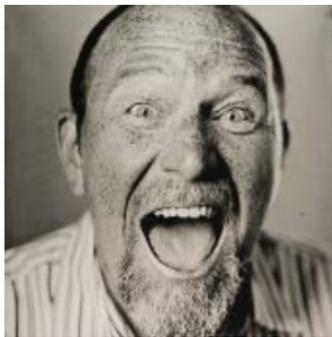
Scott Abel

Known affectionately as "The Content Wrangler," Scott Abel is an internationally recognized global content strategist who specializes in helping organizations deliver the right content to the right audience, anywhere, anytime, and on any device. He writes regularly for business and content industry publications, is frequently selected as a featured presenter at content industry events, and serves on the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley, School of Information. Scott's message is clear: Content is a business asset worth managing efficiently and effectively. His firm, The Content Wrangler, exists to help content-heavy organizations adopt the tools, technologies, and techniques they need to connect content to customers.