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Canadian Business, May 12, 2008

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Q&A

SUE GARDNER

Last December, Sue Gardner became executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit behind online encyclopedia Wikipedia, now one of the Top 10 most visited websites in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. Toronto-raised Gardner, formerly head of CBC.ca, is charged with helping the largely volunteer-run organization grow up—headquarters have already moved from St. Petersburg, Fla., to San Francisco, and Gardner has plans to hire more staff, including three full-time employees to co-ordinate fundraising. She recently spoke with *Canadian Business* staff writer JOE CASTALDO about the future of Wikimedia.

What's your job all about?

The real challenge is figuring out how to tap into the tens of thousands of volunteers and use them in the most effective possible way. They all have different skill sets, and they all have tons to contribute, so figuring out how to support them in doing that is really complex. It's a fun challenge to have.

What role does founder Jimmy Wales now play?

He likens his role today to a ceremonial, Queen of England kind of role. He waves from the float. His job is to inspire large groups of people, talk to the public and explain how the projects work. He is lucky enough that sometimes he goes to parties where there are wealthy or influential people, and he gets to talk to them and evangelize about the projects. He does it really well.

What are your goals for Wikimedia?

Wikimedia's done a terrific job of getting free information to people who are on the Internet, but it has not done such a good job of getting the information to people who aren't online, so that's the big challenge.

What's been done so far?

The German chapter of the Wikimedia Foundation has done a really good job of starting that work. They've made arrangements with various businesses to publish DVDs of Wikipedia, and to publish books based on Wikipedia. They published a book on Nobel Peace Prize winners, and they've

published a book on seals. We need to find out who doesn't have access to the website today, what kind of format they want things in, and then we need make deals with other organizations to get that information for them. If it's something that a for-profit company wants to do because they see a market for it, we would make a deal with them.

Jimmy Wales likens his role today to a ceremonial, Queen of England type. He waves from the float.



How much funding does Wikimedia need each year?

Right now it's about \$4.5 million, and probably it'll go to \$6 million. That's still remarkably efficient for what gets done by this organization. I don't think we're going to have a sustainability problem.

Wales was quoted in March as saying you have enough funding to survive, but not enough to innovate.

What's your take?

We've never had a fundraising staff, and we managed to get by just fine with people volunteering to give us funding. If we're in a position to go out and tell people we're looking for money, I don't know what the ceiling to that will look like, but I think it's a pretty high ceiling. We'll grow as much and do as much as people feel like funding.

How do you feel about allowing advertising on Wikipedia?

The organization has a position on it, and happily I share it. It's not something that we would ever 100% rule out, because it just seems like tempting fate to say you'll never do something, but it's not on the horizon for us. It's clear that if we put Google Ads on Wikipedia, it would generate enormous amounts of money. We would never have a sustainability problem. But there are some serious reasons not to do it. Probably most importantly because we want to work with educators, and teachers are very uncomfortable with advertising and anything that smacks of commercialism. We don't want to alienate those people, because they're so core to the work that we do.

Bloggers reacted skeptically when Wikimedia accepted donations from venture capitalists like Vinod Khosla recently. Why do you think that is?

Vinod and Neeru Khosla are philanthropists, and they're really interested in the work that we're doing. Neeru has her own project called CK12, which creates mix-and-match textbooks that teachers can use that are all under a free licence. So her goals are really synched up with us. It's possible that venture capitalists understood us more quickly than other kinds of philanthropists, because as a venture capitalist, your work is figuring out if something is going to be popular.

Would you ever partner with a VC?

I can't imagine what that would look like. One of things that interested me when I got here was how many business pitches we got. Everyone wants to do business with us. Most of the deals people propose don't make sense to us, but we talk to people all the time, and we're interested in doing any kind of work that furthers the mission. ❦