

MindSpring Help System (Excerpts)

Introduction

This document features excerpts of a help system I created for MindSpring, a Windows VoIP and instant messaging application. It also describes challenges I faced and explains my solutions to those challenges.

Product Description

MindSpring is a VoIP softphone and instant messaging application similar to Skype. It lets the user make voice calls using a computer, chat, send and receive files, listen to voicemail, and preview incoming email messages.

Target Audience

The primary audience is EarthLink customers who subscribe to one of EarthLink's VoIP home phone plans. MindSpring makes these home phone services portable, allowing customers to make calls on their home accounts while on the road (e.g., by installing MindSpring on a laptop computer). During development, we worked under the assumption that most of these customers had little or no experience with softphones.

The secondary audience is any Internet user who wants to make calls using a computer. For these users, calls to other MindSpring users are free, while calls to landline or mobile numbers are billed at a per-minute rate.

Help Objectives

The help system not only provides step-by-step instructions for completing tasks, but also familiarizes users with the concept of an Internet softphone, available features, and the ways the program can benefit them.

My Contribution

I wrote all of the help system's text and captured and edited the screenshots. I also used RoboHelp to format and build the final Compiled HTML Help (.chm) file for delivery to the engineering team.



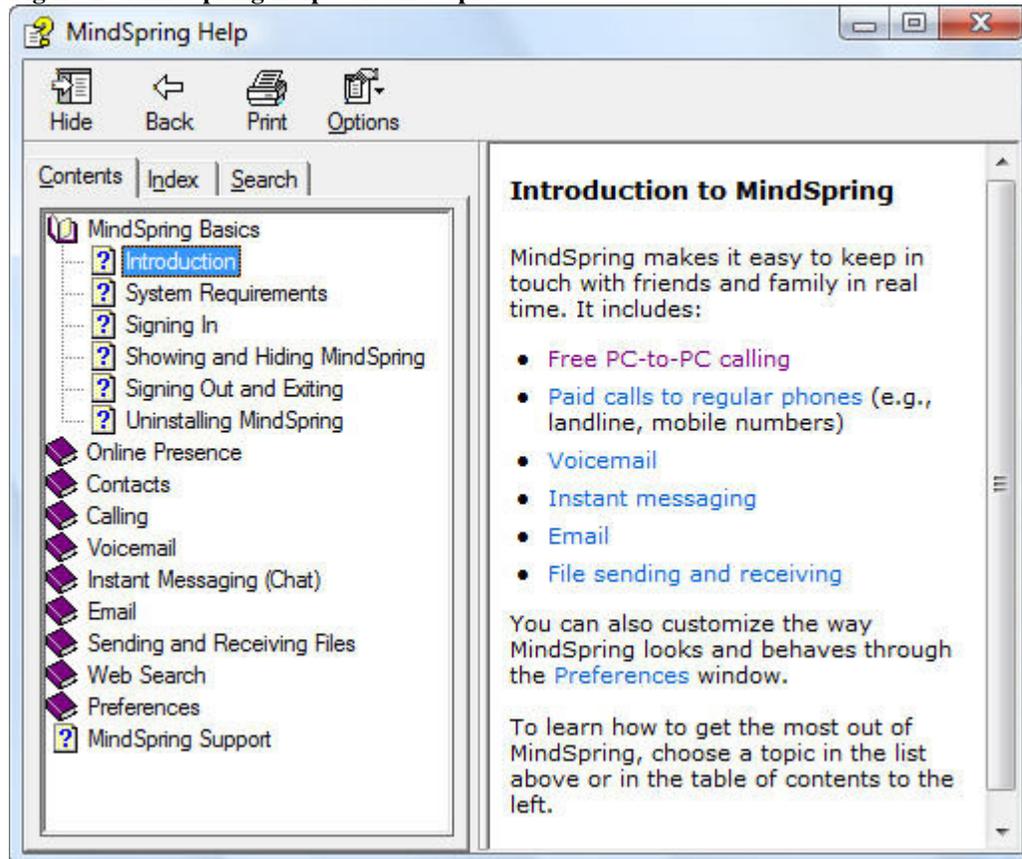
Excerpts

Main Help Window

The MindSpring Help main window (Figure 1) opens with a table of contents and default introductory topic describing the program's standout features.

- **The Challenge:** Because MindSpring has a broad collection of communication features (calling, instant messaging, email, etc.), I wanted to structure the help system so that it called out those features as soon as the help window appeared. This would give users an instant impression of the application's scope.
- **My Solution:** I organized the table of contents by major feature and listed several of the key features in the default topic ("Introduction to MindSpring") as hyperlinks to encourage users to explore them.

Figure 1 - MindSpring Help welcome topic.



Signing In

The “Signing In” topic (Figure 2) explains the procedure for launching the application, along with the various sign-in options available.

- **The Challenge:** Signing in requires some background knowledge. For example, the user needs to know what a “MindSpring ID” is and how to get one. Displaying all of this background information as soon as the user opens the topic would be overwhelming and make the sign-in process seem complicated and intimidating.
- **My Solution:** I used dynamic HTML to hide the background information behind links that users can click if they need that information. I gave the links casual, friendly labels, like “Why would I do this?” The links reveal the information through drop-down and expanding text. The result is a help topic that looks much less intimidating that it would with all of the information displayed (Figure 3).

Figure 2 - "Signing In" topic with collapsed DHTML hotspots.

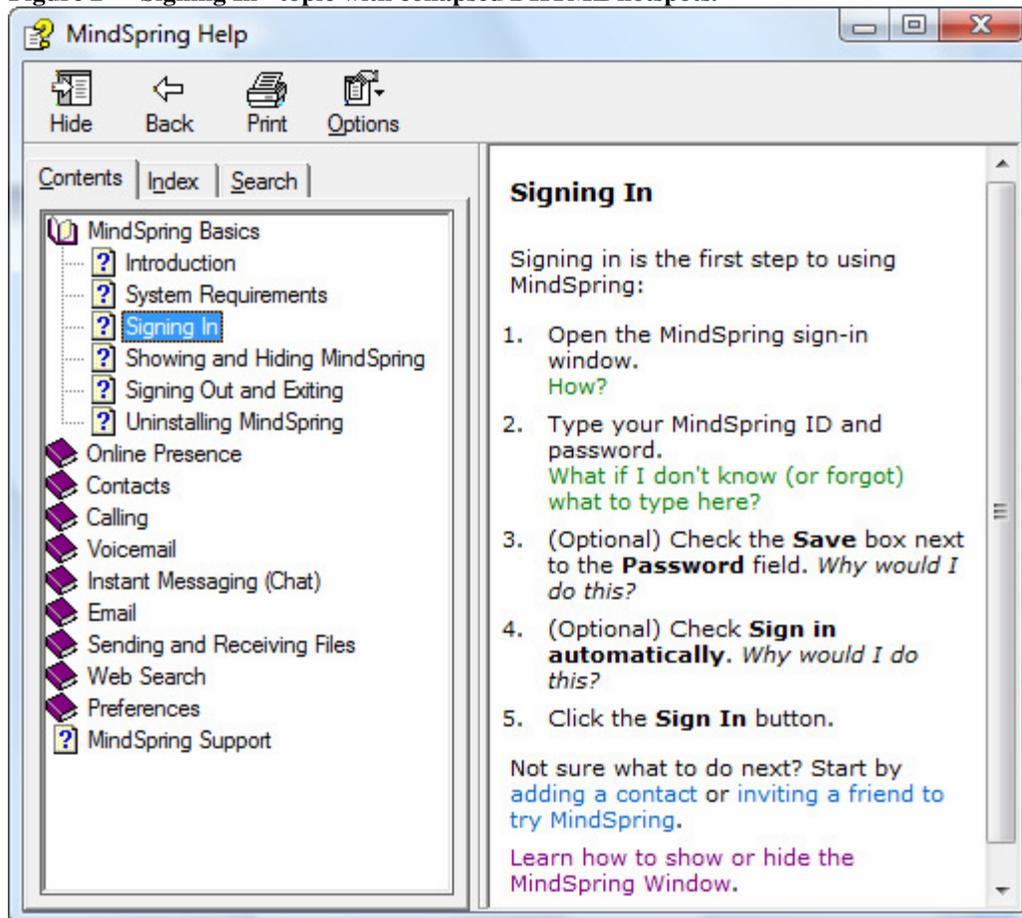


Figure 3 - "Signing In" topic with all background information displayed.

Signing In

Signing in is the first step to using MindSpring:

1. Open the MindSpring sign-in window.

[How?](#)

Open it in one of the following ways:

- Double-click the  icon if it's visible in your system tray (next to your clock).
- Double-click the **MindSpring** shortcut on your desktop.
- Click your Windows **Start** button and select **All Programs**. Then choose **EarthLink**, then **MindSpring**, and finally select the **MindSpring** icon.

2. Type your MindSpring ID and password.

[What if I don't know \(or forgot\) what to type here?](#)

The [System Requirements](#) topic describes what a MindSpring ID is.

If you already have an ID but forgot it, click the arrow next to the **MindSpring ID** box to select from a list of IDs you've previously entered.

3. (Optional) Check the **Save** box next to the **Password** field. *Why would I do this?* You won't have to re-enter your password the next time you want to sign in. (If other people have access to this computer, though, leave this box empty to prevent others from signing in under your MindSpring ID.)
4. (Optional) Check **Sign in automatically**. *Why would I do this?* It tells MindSpring to sign you in immediately when you start the program, bypassing the sign-in window. You have to save your password for this to work (see step 3).
5. Click the **Sign In** button.

Not sure what to do next? Start by [adding a contact](#) or [inviting a friend to try MindSpring](#).

[Learn how to show or hide the MindSpring Window.](#)

Adding a Contact

The topic “Adding a Contact” (Figure 4) is typical of many MindSpring help topics in that it refers to the application’s “main window” (the window that users see when they open the program).

- **The Challenge:** The application has several windows in which users complete different tasks. For example, in addition to the main window, there is a “conversation window” that opens for instant messaging and file transfers. I thought it was important to let the user know which window the instructions apply to by providing a link describing the window. But I also thought it was important not to pull the user away from the current help topic by simply linking to another topic.
- **My Solution:** I used auto-sizing pop-ups to describe the main window and similar UI features. I also included a small screenshot of the window in each pop-up. In this example, the pop-up appears when the user clicks the “main window” link in step 1 (Figure 5).

Figure 4 - A “main window” link (step 1) that opens an auto-sizing pop-up.

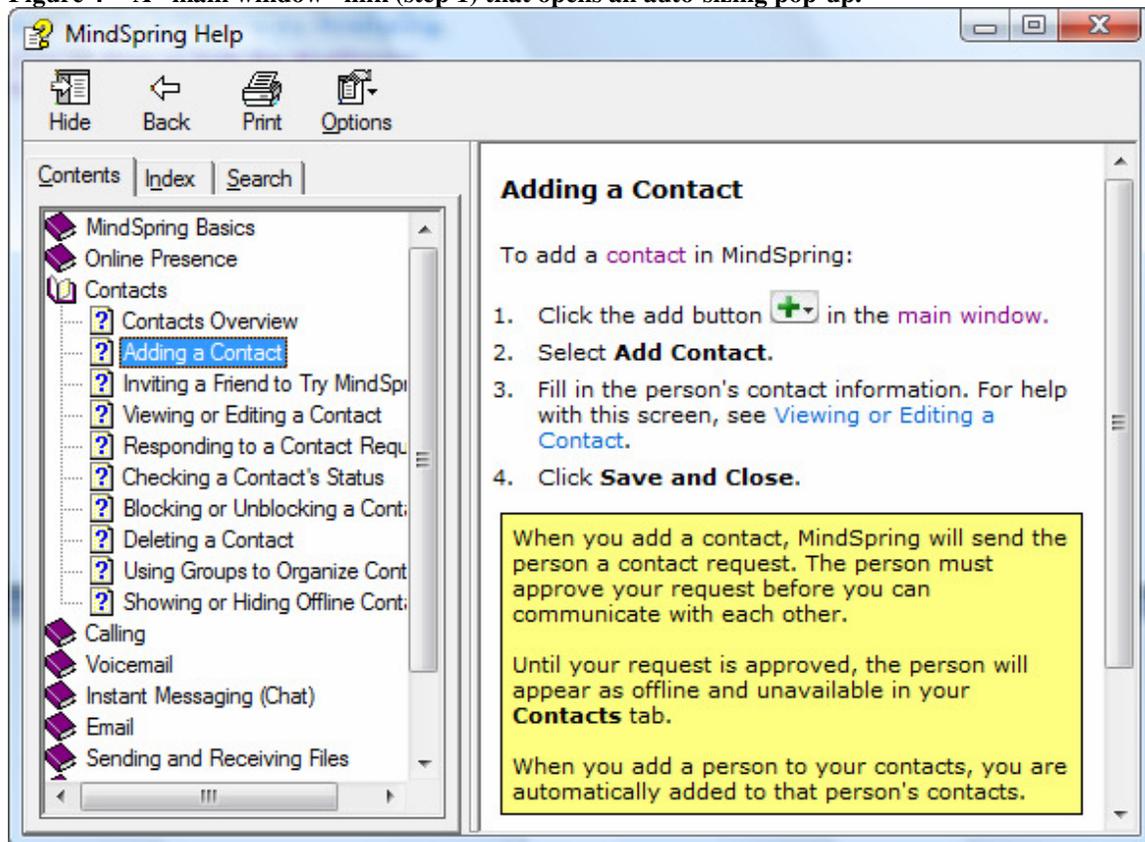


Figure 5 - Topic with auto-sizing pop-up displayed.

