

GETTING CAUGHT IN THE WEB ... THE INTERNET AND SMALL BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

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More people are getting connected to the Internet. Businesses, both nationally and internationally, are perhaps the biggest constituents of the Internet. It has become an integral marketing tool for large and small firms alike. In this paper, the author discusses the Hows and Whys of Web access for small businesses. To remain competitive, businesses must understand the implications of the information-rich infrastructure the Internet provides. The impact of exponential development in Web-based technology to Internet usage is also covered. Benjoe Juliano's home page is at <http://www.coastal.edu/~juliano>

Introduction

Who would have predicted that what started in the late 1960's as a project of the U.S. Department of Defense would lead to what the Internet is today? The Internet has surpassed all other technological equipment, gadgets, tools, and appliances as far as rate of development goes. In the 1970's, it was initially intended as a military tool but then it became a research tool in the academic community (Comer, 1995). Universities across the U.S. soon connected their networks to the Internet to facilitate research. By the late 1980's, there were about 200 computer networks connected to the Internet; by 1990, there were more than 2,000. As of 1993, realizing many other applications of the Internet, this number jumped to 10,497 networks in 53 countries with over 6,000 networks in the United States alone (Comer, 1995). There are currently more than 46 million users connected to the Internet, and that number is growing very rapidly (Pitkow and Kehoe, 1997).

So, what is this thing people refer to as the Web? The Web is an Internet browsing service that allows users to reference information available on various computers. It is a mechanism that links information stored on computers at different remote sites. Various data formats are supported by this service: textual information, sounds, graphical images, full-motion video, etc. Through the Web, people can access information

across the globe. People can also provide information across the globe. These features make the Web an excellent resource and marketing tool for businesses.

Why Spin Your Own Web?

As more and more people began accessing the Internet, the word "Web" also acquired a secondary meaning. Anyone who had the tools to create *hypermedia* documents (meaning documents containing references to nontextual information such as sound and graphics) stored in a network connected to the Internet that were linked to other such hypermedia basically created their own "web" that was accessible through the Web. Creating all these links to other areas of the Web was akin to a spider spinning its own web.

Why should a business spin its own web? Consider, for example, searching for information about Myrtle Beach on the Internet. The author obtained more than 400,000 hits with the *excite* search engine and more than 100,000 hits using the *Alta Vista* search engine (the numbers have actually decreased from an earlier study conducted a few months earlier, most likely due to downsizing the number of hits on some search engines to accommodate more significant documents). This gives us an idea as to how much information (primarily tourist attractions, hotels and restaurants, and real estate) about Myrtle Beach is available on the Web.

Table 1.
Searching for references to "Myrtle Beach" on the Web
 (data collected September 29, 1997).

Search Engine		Number of documents found
Name	URL	
Alta Vista	altavista.digital.com	101,720
Euro Seek	www.euroseek.net	
3,770		
excite	www.excite.com	438,701
hotbot	www.hotbot.com	
18,549		
infoseek	www.infoseek.com	4,759
Lycos	www.lycos.com	17,199
WebCrawler	www.webcrawler.com	52,276
yaboo	www.yahoo.com	179

The Grand Strand is undoubtedly one of the most popular tourist areas in the U.S. As familiarity with the Internet increasingly becomes common for everyone it comes to no surprise that practically every city is becoming even more visible through the Web. Nowadays, tourists access the Web to shop around for information regarding a particular area of interest prior to visiting that area. They get up to date information about the weather, the latest and best attractions, and most importantly for ideas on what they can spend their money on.

Most businesses that have gone on-line by spinning their own web have realized the potential of the Internet for online commerce. Its support for multimedia facilitates delivering customer-based, interactive information through sounds, full color graphic images, video clips, online order forms, or even surveys on the Web. Most have also discovered the Web as a cost-effective advertising media, in contrast to more traditional media such as the newspaper, television, and the radio. Advertising on the Web allows you to broadcast your information to a world wide audience of more than 46 million people, 24 hours a day.

There are, of course, other reasons why businesses should seriously consider spinning their own web. It is not just considered the "in" thing to have a WWW address on television commercials and on most new products. Having a WWW

address indicates that your business is serious about your customers' needs. Some companies are already replacing standard brochures, flyers, and business cards with WWW addresses that display dynamic pages that can be accessed from all over the world via the Internet in just a matter of seconds (Gibson, 1997). Furthermore, moving towards a paper-less society and using electronic media is also an environmentally friendly way to do business.

What Does the Web Have to Offer?

The Web allows one to create and store *hypermedia* documents that are accessible through remote browsers around the world. As mentioned earlier, hypermedia documents usually contain references to nontextual information such as sound and graphics. The term "multimedia", on the other hand, encompasses hypermedia documents and focuses more on what the user may encounter as they experience a document. Hence, documents on the Web are no longer static like traditional documents. They no longer need to stay passive. Depending on whatever features one incorporates on a *Webified* document, these pages are dynamic, interactive, and may have full-color graphics, animation, real-time audio and even real-time video (Galea, 1997). All this for a fraction of the cost of having the same or a similar effect on a television commercial!

Of course other traditional Internet services are also available. This includes electronic mail or e-mail, which facilitates the use of electronic forms (Krakowka, 1997). With e-mail, customers are given another means of getting in touch with you and your business. Electronic forms, on the other hand, can be used for processing orders, requests for more product information, etc. As a means of providing immediate feedback to your customers, electronic forms can also be used for surveys, comments and suggestion sheets, etc. Other more recent trends on the Internet will be elaborated in the section titled "What is the future of the Web?"

Web page design is crucial when putting information on-line. This really depends significantly on the type and number of target audience you expect to visit your site. A lot of graphics, sound, and animation will really grab the users' attention. But as a picture paints a thousand words, a thousand bytes may take than a few seconds to download in a computer equipped with less than ideal components (Blumenthal, 1997). Not every user out there will have a Pentium class machine with enough memory to render the most graphics enhanced pages. Some Web page designers who love feature-laden pages have adopted the "Too bad" attitude towards users with substandard computers - if these users are not willing to wait to experience the full impact of your pages, then it is not worth catering to them. This is fine if you don't mind losing these customers! Others provide plain text and graphics-enhanced versions of their pages. The choice depends on a lot of factors. Deciding on how much graphics to put on a page based on your target audience remains a major decision in Web page design.

Perhaps the most important feature of the Web is its speed, and "from [its] speed emerges interactivity" (Hitchcock, 1996). In comparison to the traditional way of designing, printing, and distributing a corporate brochure, the Web cuts down on the time it takes to disseminate information. On-line electronic brochures can be updated at any time. These documents, and any changes made to them, would immediately be accessible on the Web. The same holds true for changes in pricing information, product specifications, new product announcements, and even product recalls.

Using the Web to supplement traditional business methods also implies adopting a change in how one does business. Adopting Internet technologies within a firm can dramatically lower information publishing and dissemination costs by eliminating the need for paper broadcasting processes (Kambil, 1997). Through the Web, companies have to redefine how they communicate with their customers. These customers can place orders, seek out detailed product and technical information, check out prices and order status, and even configure products on a corporate Web site. Some sites even allow users to program automatic software agents to alert them of special offers and new product arrivals - a service tailored to the specific customer. Internet access also allows small and large firms alike to access expertise, information, and resources worldwide at low costs. This lowers information and entry barriers across various industries, allowing smaller firms to better leverage resources and compete on a global scale (Kambil, 1997).

How Does One Spin One's Own Web?

What exactly does one need to start spinning his or her own Web? You really do not need to have a computer to set up your Web documents. If you do not currently have a computer, you can get in touch with an Internet Service Provider (or ISP) to furnish you with the necessary tools to publish on the Web. Various ISPs provide a choice of packages depending on the types of services that you need. These services may include housing and maintaining your Web pages, providing you with an Internet address so people around the world can access your Web pages, as well as other Web-based programming jobs. Various services may also provide choices for network technology, depending on the speed of access you want to your audience to have. The rule of thumb here is that the more graphics your Web pages have, the higher bandwidth required to transmit them at an acceptable rate.

Businesses should remember not to limit themselves to local ISPs. In general, if your business is in a small- to average-sized city, you may be better off doing business with a provider in a larger city, perhaps even in another state. It

