

## Open for eBusiness

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August 1999

That the Internet is becoming an important place of business is probably proven beyond reasonable doubt. My aim in this article is to provide a practical guide to the infrastructure issues any business needs to consider when establishing a presence on-line. One of the main problems in this area is a lack of established role models or standards; the following examples take a slightly tongue-in-cheek look at some of the scenarios we observe as a service provider.

The first could be politely termed the 'arms length approach'. This is based on the premise that the Internet is at best an inconvenient necessity and at worst a dire threat to civilisation as we know it. This usually consists of a single dial up account on a stand alone (yellowing) PC in a particularly draughty corner of the office. Any company web pages will have been created by a junior member of staff who has since left for a more interesting job elsewhere. On the positive side, no one is wasting their time surfing the net when they should be working, and the direct costs are minimal.

The second scenario is one of 'corporate muddle'. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways but here are some of the more common symptoms:

- The only people in the building with access to the Web are the IT department.
- The Web site is full of sumptuous graphics adapted from a paper brochure, but it takes about 20 minutes to load the first page.
- Internal email works fine but attachments always seem to be going missing when communicating with the outside world.
- Email is sent and received at regular intervals over a dial up connection which costs far more in call charges than an appropriate leased line connection would.
- The company has a strong brand but this is not reflected in its web address (any web address which includes the name of the ISP is a dead give-away).
- Internet provision is viewed as a cost rather than a benefit.
- If problems arise, it is impossible to be sure who is responsible - IT? Marketing? The ISP? Microsoft? Or God?!

I could go on but the point is simple, many or perhaps most organisations do not have a clear strategic vision of their place in cyberspace and consequently adopt piecemeal solutions.

In the following paragraphs the main practical issues which should be addressed by any business are discussed under three headings; identity, connection and control.

## Identity

The first issue is simple, if you do not have your own domain name you are not taking the Internet seriously. Holding a domain name is like owning your own building but much, much cheaper. A domain name such as mybiz.co.im can be moved between different service providers without needing to be changed. It also gives you control of the email addresses you use, for example, sales@mybiz.co.im, fred@mybiz.co.im and promotion@mybiz.co.im may all go to the same mail box. Holding a domain name is a vital first step in developing a coherent on-line identity. It provides both instant credibility and a foundation for future development, and costs very little... so get one!

## Connection

The second important consideration is the type of connection employed to link your business to the Net. There are in essence two types of connection; dial up and permanent. A dial up connection uses a conventional or ISDN phone line to connect to an Internet Service Provider (ISP) when required, whilst a permanent connection provides constant access at a fixed price.

Typically, dial up solutions are adopted as an initial 'toe in the water' and restricted to individual computers not on the office network. This approach has the benefit of being both cheap and secure but is a bit like running a business from a public payphone. A dial up solution has two fundamental limitations. The first is the cost of call charges which can mount up very quickly, the second is simply the reduced effectiveness of a system which cannot support real time e-mail, a web server or any other form of permanent service.

Permanent connections rely on fixed infrastructure in the form of leased lines; these are permanent circuits connecting a business to their ISP. Leased lines provide a permanently open connection to the Internet at a fixed price which is therefore budgetable - there are no hidden costs. There is a perception in the business community that leased line solutions are very expensive. In practice, however, the annual cost of an ISDN based connection can very quickly exceed that of a leased line without the benefit of real time email and web access. Also there are a number of new low cost products coming onto the market designed for specific business needs.

## Control

Finally there is the question of control, this relates to both internal and external factors, and is probably the most technical issue when setting up a connection. The internal factors relate to working practices and productivity. External control is about securing your systems and data against attack from outside. Here it is important there are clear business rules; who should have access to email, web, ftp etc. internally, and what types of incoming traffic do you want to accept. Also how are you protected against incoming virus attack? This is an area where it is particularly important to work with the service provider to ensure that an appropriate and cost effective solution is implemented.

Published in Money Media, August 1999