

WWW the sequel

By Chris Gledhill, Managing Director, PDMS

I was slightly peeved the other day to get a spam email advertising a new and innovative low cost telecommunications service. The service promised much including the ability to virtually eliminate roaming charges on mobile phones. So why the irritation you may ask, surely this is the sort of thing I would be interested in? The problem was that this company offered something which sounded exactly the same as the service we have helped Callkey (callkey.com) to develop and deploy worldwide. Who were these people? And where did they get off stealing our partners ideas...

I couldn't have been more wrong however. Some careful detective work revealed that the offending site had been deployed by one of Callkey's distributors using a 'web services' interface we had developed and was fully integrated with, and actively promoting, the Callkey service.

The Callkey service provides a wide variety of sophisticated features for user registration, payment processing, billing and of course call routing, conferencing, recording and so on. Our friends had simply put their own shop front onto the same set of services. The amazing (and gratifying) thing from our point of view was that they had done so without any help from us.

Around about the same time, a new term has started to gain currency with industry analysts, journalists and start-up companies looking for venture capital. Even BBC journalists have started to talk about 'Web 2.0', the problem is what do they mean? It could be the sequel to the dot com bubble, same actors, same basic premise, even less plausible script? Alternatively it could refer to a new set of standards or software applications being touted as the next big thing. A little research however, reveals that it started as a conference on successful web based business strategies a little under two years ago and has now become synonymous with an approach to the web which emphasises user participation, interactivity and a service oriented approach to software. This is contrasted with a more centralised web publishing model retrospectively dubbed web 1.0.

Setting aside the marketing hype generated by all those people wanting to be associated with the next big thing, whether they understand it or not, 'Web 2.0' is a useful shorthand for some of the characteristics, both technical and philosophical, which differentiate the more interesting and successful applications and businesses springing up on line.

There are many different aspects to 'Web 2.0' depending on your perspective. To some it is about technical concepts such as AJAX (an approach to programming which allows web applications to be more interactive and functionally rich). To others it is about socio-political constructs such as 'citizen journalism'. However, at its core it is about the value of active participation by the user of an application or service.

So how does this manifest itself and why should I care? The best way to illustrate what all this means is by example. Amazon get exactly the same information about books as anyone else in the industry but their site has vastly more user reviews than any of their competitors (good and bad.) This, coupled with a very sophisticated real time analysis of user behaviour, results in their ability to present the user with product links, suggestions and search results which reflect the interests of customers rather than conventional merchandising based on commercial considerations. This in turn makes for a far more interesting site and correspondingly higher sales. In other words we all add value to Amazon's business simply by browsing the site and that by all accounts is very Web 2.0.

Ebay is an even more pronounced example of the value of user participation. At first sight the idea of buying second hand goods on-line from an anonymous vendor seems totally naïve. In practice however, because both buyers and sellers give and receive 'feedback' on the outcome of transactions, regular users rapidly develop a reputation which is there for all to see. Honest traders have good feedback whilst those with bad or no feedback are treated with caution. In this way a global business phenomenon has grown out of the willingness of users to share their experiences of one another.

One of my favourite examples however is Wikipedia, described by some as an example of 'radical trust', Wikipedia is an online encyclopaedia built up of individual contributions. Anyone can add or edit an article and the only guarantee of accuracy is the pride of the originator and the vigilance of the reader who can correct any errors or omissions. This unlikely premise has resulted in a vast (and free) multilingual source of reference which has been shown to be as accurate as the Encyclopaedia Britannica and is almost certainly a great deal more up to date than the copy you were bought as a graduation present. Wikipedia is a free resource funded entirely by donations from users, yet it is already one of the 100 most popular sites on the web and is widely expected to reach the top ten soon.

So to get back to that spam email (paragraph one if you have unaccountably lost my thread), when I think about it, getting an unsolicited email from someone I have never heard of offering a re-branded version of a service we host is seriously Web 2.0. I couldn't be more proud!