

Leveling the playing field

By Dave Olson

Internet publishing, business and mayhem

The Internet was originally created for communication between military, academics, research institutions and the like. Not surprisingly, marketers salivated at the idea of turning the whole thing into a mall / multi-level scheme. While on-line commerce has many benefits, I see the Internet more importantly as a communications tool & publishing medium that allows a new breed of artist/entrepreneur to reach a bigger, yet more focused, audience.

Fine web sites provide a subtle concoction of art design, content and entertainment with new ways of commerce and (importantly) use this new medium without replicating old, tired, inefficient models of business, entertainment or publishing. You can break all this down into three emerging Internet trends: e.commerce, virtual community building, and multi-media. I will go easy on the buzzwords.

Electronic commerce provide an efficient, easy way to do your business anonymously, discreetly, 24-7 and with no irritating humans providing poor service and/or breath. Whether you are buying, selling, seeking the unusual, or just buying groceries, the potential of on-line sales abounds, no question about it. E.commerce is not a fad, it will be the primary way to buy things in the very short-term future. The problem now is the lack of easily implemented, adaptable, affordable e.commerce technology. Thus, most on-line stores provide impersonal, non-exciting on-line shopping experiences. This bugged me more before I remembered that going to a real store is also uninspiring and a drag, unless I am browsing or shopping for fun. I still want to browse and shop at neat stores I like, I just don't want to have to go to the grocery store every week to buy the same 50 items, when I could choose my food list on-line, and have it delivered or ready for pick-up.

The best e.commerce technologies live with the biggest on-line companies who have staggering IPOs into the billions of dollars and don't plan on making money for years. Will this bring death to Mom and Pop businesses? Will quaint niche shops and the sense of interaction and community that comes with shopping be gone? Nope, in fact, the

sense of community is enhanced in many ways, on-line auction sites being an example.

My Mom has developed a fairly involved e.bay habit in the last year. She is making good money selling old books for ludicrous sums of money, but more than that, she has established a base of customers spread around the world. She knows all about her customers, what authors they like, their approximate budgets, birthdays and all sorts of things that no local businesses that I frequent here in town knows about me. Plus, she can run her business on her own time rather than running a "real" book store 9-5 like my Grandma does. Grandma has been running her quaint "brick and mortar" store (selling mostly used romance novels and other paperbacks) for about 12 years, but the market is limited to her small town. Mom's market is limited to people who are on the Internet. Guess who makes more money selling books now? Guess who works less at their job?

This ties into virtual community building and the idea that quality is more important than quantity. An example of "build it and they will come" is a site I worked on about Hemp culture in Japan (www.taima.org). A purely research and educational site for a very focused interest group. After only a few months there are more than 300 people stopping by per day and, better yet, spending an average of 45 minutes at the site. Many also sign onto the e.mailing lists which efficiently dispatch topical developments in English and Japanese.

Since the site's publications, Japanese cannabis activists have met on-line, started associations and held real life conferences, yet they didn't even know each other until this on-line "community" was planted. From my vantage point, this is more desirable than the seething throngs migrating towards non-focused "communities" like Geocities etc. for their smoke and mirrors of "free" e.mail address, lame web hosting & excessive advertising.

Multimedia and <buzzword> the broadband revolution </buzzword> are making virtual communities more interesting places to be when wider bandwidth (such as DSL, cable or T-1) is used to disseminate useful and entertaining video, audio and animation. On-line "radio stations" and live video streams make fine examples of what can be done with a great deal less start-up costs, less regulation and larger potential audience than a traditional radio or TV broadcast facility.

Indeed, in a few months local stations like KAOS (www.kaosradio.org), who already have a fine website, could very well be available to Evergreen alumni and the general public worldwide. This would likely bring in valuable donations from throughout the world and oddly enough, many of us here in Oly will be able to hear a clearer broadcast via the Internet than an FM tuner. If you add in discussion groups, e.mail (or some evil chat room) into the studio, along with quality content & design, a site will soon reach some sort of critical mass and grow into a on-line community of users, listeners, programmers, patron business, bands. Fun for all.

Further, the advent of decent (yet still evolving) encoding technology will radically change the role of record labels, concert promoters and allow bands to do their own thing easier, better, cheaper, thus having more time to create new stuff. Big labels are just starting to realize the emergence of high-quality music and rampant piracy on the web and they are scared and confused. Ha, ha.

Soon some live music venues will likely be broadcasting live or on-demand performances of performers who come through town. Imagine a band that has a few days off between Portland or Seattle that wouldn't usually play Olympia (not enough people/money) but if they could play for say 300 people live and 3000 logged into the show around the world, that could make it worth their while.

Bear in mind that web delivered multi-media is ideal promotion scheme for bands. Instead of sending a \$20 CD promo pack to dozens of record execs, venues, labels, magazines hoping they will come to watch you play (yeah right), you can simply point them to a web site where they can hear cd-quality clips of your songs, see video clips of your concert, check upcoming tour stops or past show playlists, download pictures, the whole thing. Frequency DB had a good thing going with their site (www.olywa.net/sunnyside/frequencydb), not too fancy but fine content, tour dates and MP3 clips.

The tricky part is jumping through all the business and legal hoops like:

How is revenue generated (through banner ads, pay per view, site membership/subscriptions, corporate sponsors, etc.) and who gets what and who pays for what?

It requires thought but figuring out the business legalities is better than being spoon-fed more musical Pablum from an A&R man in a tie. Could it be the means for an artistic Renaissance, so to speak? Regardless, the real winners are music fans and indie artists.

Several downtown bars and restaurants already have high-speed DSL lines installed to run Internet kiosks or for their patrons use. Take this a step further and add web cams, then you could virtually check out various establishments around town before heading out for your evening adventures. Is this an invasion of privacy? I think it is convenient and I like convenience.

Over the next while, this column will review noteworthy locations on the WWW, discuss new ways to use the Internet and means of on-line publishing plus the social implications of it all.

Got a web site you think will make us smile? Send the site title and url to dave.o@olywa.net and the Internet-Adventures team will break it down using our proprietary point scheme (rated for Content, Navigation, Design and Technology) in future columns.

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