

GeT on web

Everyone can see the fire burning, expertise lie in smelling the smoke - a quote that all of us has heard more than once in our lives. Translate that into biz world and it sounds similar to - 'I should have bought Infosys stock in 1995' vs. 'I bought Infosys stock in 1995'! Needless to say our future depends a lot on our ability to spot emerging trends and translating them into biz opportunities.

On the other hand, sometimes it makes sense to take the leadership position and start a trend - where a gap exists - and change the paradigm altogether! Based on what I see in the market today and some of the gaps & emerging trends (GeT) here is my betting list. (Note: The article uses example of sites & retailers in US but will hold true for examples anywhere in the world, look at the end of the article for explanation).

Thin client is thin no more - Gap

Have you lately noticed how bloated the so-called 'thin client' has become? Just the browser itself takes more than 25MB and this does not include helper apps or other plug-ins that you may have to install. The browser is good enough for reading documents or sharing text based information, but it severely limits the kind of user experience you can provide. On top of that, developing applications rich in functionality to run within the browser is not only a pain in the neck but is overly restrictive, to say the least.

So, the time has come to 'think outside the browser'! In fact, the trend had already started with helper apps, like RealAudio, where we do not have to start a browser to enjoy the power of web. Now we have reached the inflection point where it makes a lot of sense to provide 'software agents' to users that they can download and configure for their own use rather than forcing the user to go to your web site every time they need to perform a function. One of the upside of the software agents would be that the user is less likely to 'click away' to another site - so no question of losing eyeballs.

The software agent will use the power of web technology for data collection and transactions and use the power of PC for delivering excellent user interface. Let's take an example - today we usually go to couple of different sites or 'price comparison sites', like 'mySimon.com or pricewatch.com' and try to find out where we can get the best deal. Then we may end up going to multiple sites to get the cheapest price on each of the items that we wanted; or, we may end up buying everything from one site even though we will be paying few extra \$\$\$s just for the sake of convenience.

Now consider this - I have a 'Shopping Agent' that resides on my PC. All I have to do is to start up this application and set up my decision factors, as I would decide if I had to do all these tasks by myself. So, I could define rules like - 'Buy books and CDs from the site that is cheaper' & 'Buy clothes from Land's End unless Macy's is selling the same thing cheaper', etc. The 'agent' will work on its own without any intervention from me

and I can go off and do something better with my time. The power of web will be realized when software starts working for me rather than I working the software.

Merging e-commerce with old commerce - Gap

You may know of someone who goes to local bookshop and browses the aisles to see which books s/he likes and then comes home and orders them over the web - maybe from the same shop's web site! It makes a lot of sense to do that because now you got the best of both worlds - you can sample the books in person and get the rock-bottom price too.

Sooner or later this is where a paradigm shift will happen. The old commerce will start taking advantage of the new commerce. For example, you could walk into the local bookstore and when you have browsed the aisles you walk up to a kiosk and order the same book from the store's web site for less. Or, when you walk up to the cash register the clerk asks you - 'would you like to order them through our web store or would you like to buy them now'? You may decide to buy one or two at that time and order the rest via web and pay for all of them then & there. That way the store does not lose a customer and you do not have to send your credit-card information over the web along with having other payment options, like cash! A win-win situation for everyone except the competitors that are stuck in e-space only.

Portals, portals everywhere - Emerging trend

Now that b2c (biz-to-consumer) e-commerce is not the leading edge and b2b (biz-to-biz) commerce has become an old term where do we go next? The trends we are going to see are information (content) management and portals in every shape and form. A lot of companies have already started positioning themselves as leaders in being 'corporate portals', 'information portals' or 'personal portals'. If this idea is combined with what I mentioned earlier - software agents - we may finally be able to really use the web. Imagine your desktop being your portal, where you have search agents, shopping agents, local or international news scroll etc based on your configured parameters. Microsoft started with the idea of active desktop but did not take it far enough. If we can download, for free, a personal portal from Yahoo or Excite or Alta Vista or a third party that combines information, search, e-commerce, messaging and collaboration etc - that would truly make the underlying OS irrelevant. Why do I have to start the browser or another application every time I need to do any of these functions? The desktop is going to become the point of convergence for all of power that web has to provide. This becomes especially easier when we have 'always on' connections like DSL or cable modem etc.

Global trade with e-currency - Gap

Today, majority of e-commerce is targeted for North America. Even if many organizations would like to expand beyond NA one of the prohibitive problem is the very reason for doing commerce - money, as not all currencies are convertible. On top

of it many people do not use credit card or may not want to enter the credit card information into a web site.

What needs to emerge is a common e-currency. This is easy said than done, as there will be legislative and political hurdles that will have to be crossed. Consider if you may, that we have an e-card that is ONLY accepted on the net. You buy this card which is pre-paid in local currency and are allocated 'e-points' for that amount. The e-commerce sites that honor this e-card will not only show the price in US\$ or other currencies but also in e-points. That way all you have to do is make sure you bought enough points to cover your purchases and then re-charge the card only when you need to purchase something. No more fear of someone stealing your credit card information over the wire or from an e-retailer's database!

Possibilities Unlimited

The possibilities are endless and I tried to highlight some of the trends that will emerge on web and how it will truly be assimilated into our lives. The organizations and people who are courageous enough to think fast and outside of the box (not to mention the browser) are going to be the winners. That would be the time when we can truly say - The web has arrived!

Examples used in the article

Macy's -

One of the oldest departmental stores chain in the US. A very household name and went into e-commerce more of as a reactionary measure. (www.macys.com)

Land's End -

A clothing retailer that does not have bricks and mortar stores. They used to operate only via catalogs but now have a major presence on web. (www.landsend.com)

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