

## *MAKE IT HAPPEN. ON THE NET*

*By Neil Ogden*

### *Part One*

There's little doubt that the Internet is here and here to stay, and there now seems less and less doubt of its importance regarding business trading. Many people though, still find the prospect of using this exciting medium to help their business daunting. Hopefully, this short series of articles will give you some ideas on how it can be part of *your* business and help overcome any doubts about the Internet's business potential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

First of all, back to basics. What is the Internet?

The Internet is basically a huge world-wide network of computers all linked together by the phone system. Although most people would tend to think of the internet as a fairly new invention, its roots can actually be traced back as far as 1962 when American government agencies conceived the idea of a network of computers linked together to protect their nuclear command centre from outside attack. The term "internet" was first used in the mid 1970s and the technology for the system that is more recognisable with what we have today came along about 8 years or so later. But it wasn't until the early 1990s that restrictions were lifted on the commercial use of the Internet that led to the situation we have today. The first web browser (software used to view the Internet) *Mosaic* was introduced in 1991 and gradually more and more ISPs (Internet Service Providers) were appearing allowing more and more people to gain access to the Internet.

As well as the world wide web, e-mail was an increasingly used resource and the number of e-mail messages being sent started to increase dramatically during the mid nineties. I remember sitting talking to a friend one evening who was saying that he could foresee a time when someone's e-mail address would be as important as his or her postal address. So far, he hasn't been far off the mark.

To start with, ISPs charged a monthly fee to use them to connect to the Internet. The biggest ISPs in the UK to start with were probably CompuServe and AOL followed closely by a few others. But the advent of Freeserve was to change things again. They were the first free ISP - users being charged only for a local rate phone call. This opened the Internet up once again to lots more people who may have been put off by subscription charges before.

Things then developed further with unlimited Internet access for a monthly fee being introduced by more and more companies. Now we have the further development of Internet access with the use of faster broadband connection, also for a monthly fee.

The Government has announced various intentions to help spread the use of this new technology and encourage more people and especially schools get connected.

So how can the Internet help your business? The first way is ease of communication via e-mail. You can use e-mail to send messages thousands of miles in just a few seconds. E-mail makes it easy to communicate with people and companies a few miles or a few thousand miles away. Attached to those e-mails can be files of just about any description. I remember when our local radio station was being set up, two of the people involved as Directors were corresponding all the time by e-mail; sending documents of figures and plans to each other. They only live half a mile away from each other, but e-mail provided them with a quick way of communicating over business plans etc and of sending important documents quickly and easily.

On the same theme, at Hospital Radio Basingstoke, we have a contact in America who produces all our station voice-overs for us. I send him a list of what we want by e-mail, and a few hours later, back comes the file with them all recorded. This is a process that would take many days and involve much higher cost were it not for e-mail.

You can communicate with customers and contacts of your business by e-mail and tap into a huge potential market for your products.

However, useful though e-mail is, it is the world wide web side of the internet that will ultimately offer the most potential for businesses choosing to take advantage of internet technology.

But there is still a lot of hype as to what you can expect from a web site. True, there are sites that get thousands of visits every day, but there are many more who don't and with the number of indexable pages growing by millions every single year, that is hardly surprising when you think about it.

Having said that, I really do believe that Internet sites utilising e-commerce in particular are going to become big business in the future. We are already seeing many examples of companies offering their customers the opportunity to purchase their products over the Internet and this can only increase in the future. The secret I believe is in seeing the internet not as an ADVERTISEMENT, but as an ACTIVE working part of a business in its own right - making it known that your business has its own web site and that that is where prospective customers can find out more and possibly even buy your products. Sitting back and waiting for people to find your site is just not going to work.

Put your web site address on business cards, letterheads, printed ads, circulars etc. Use it as an extension to your existing promotional literature and advertising.

Look through magazine and newspaper ads and see how many now include e-mail and web site addresses.

At the end of the day though, your web site probably has just one main purpose for you - to ultimately sell more of your products, so you need to work out how your site is going to achieve that aim. You need to work out how you are going to use your web site to sell your products. Will this involve visitors simply giving their details via e-mail so that you can follow that enquiry up later by e-mail or ordinary post? Or will this involve visitors going the whole way and purchasing on line with their credit card?

Collecting data from visitors to follow up or reply to later is one of the simplest ways to put the web site to work. You can collect information using an online form and this information is e-mailed to you and the appropriate information then sent out by post or e-mail. You can also use an autoresponder to send out information automatically and possibly even to follow that up a few days later, again completely automatically.

In part two of this series, I'll take a more detailed look at setting up a web site and also at e-commerce, what many believe to be the big internet money spinner of the future.