

EVERYBODY'S INTERNET UPDATE

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 Edited by Adam Gaffin, adamg@world.std.com

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1. SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP
 - 1.1 OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Every day, it seems, you hear about yet another company or store going online to peddle its wares. In 1994, Home Shopping Network, better known for selling cubic zirconia on cable TV, bought the Internet Shopping Network, an online computer store. Its rival, QVC, also has plans for an Internet service. One would think the Internet is fast becoming an online bazaar, where you can pick up everything from mainframe computers to flowers, chocolate and lingerie (yes, Valentine's Day approaches). Much of this is being driven by the World-Wide Web, which makes possible such things as online catalogs (complete with photos) and order forms. To be sure, there were online stores before the Web took off, but the Web lets a company show off its wares, and logo, in an easy-on-the-eyes (and easy-to-use) format. And pre-Web efforts concentrated more on giving you limited access to an online catalog -- you still had to call a phone number somewhere to actually place an order.

But are **you** going to buy something over the Internet? For all the hype over small florists getting international orders over the Internet, one has to wonder whether these storefronts will ultimately prove more successful than the ones that have long been present on commercial networks such as CompuServe and Prodigy. Are you going to entrust your credit-card number to the Internet, a network on which security concerns have made front-page news more than once?

1.2 THE CHECK'S IN THE (E-)MAIL

Some electronic merchants say that sending your credit-card number over the Internet is really no more risky than handing it over to a clerk in a department store. Their argument is base on security through obscurity --

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there are so many e-mail messages pouring through the Internet each day that it would be virtually impossible for a hacker to find the ones containing credit-card information.

Others, however, are more wary -- as are their potential customers. Merchants also want some assurances that the person making an order really is who she says she is. Internet e-mail is simply ASCII text, and while the sheer volume of it these days would make it difficult to find specific messages, one should never underestimate the ability of a hacker with a computer to find a needle in a haystack (i.e., one credit card number out of thousands of messages).

As you might expect, a number of companies are working on making the Internet safe for business. CommerceNet, a joint venture between the U.S. government and companies in California's Silicon Valley, has developed a system based on encryption. When you fill out an online order form, it is encoded in such a way that only the merchant you're sending it to can de-code it -- and inside will be your unique "digital signature," proving you are, in fact, you.

But this approach relies on you having a special piece of software on your computer to encrypt the order form. Netscape's World-Wide Web browser is the first to incorporate this software (that's what the little broken key in the lower left hand corner is for), but other companies that sell Web browsers will be adding it over the next few months.

The basic way it works relies on a technique known as public-key encryption. In this system, the merchant has a public key, or mathematical formula, that can be used to encrypt messages meant for him. Anybody can use this key, but only the merchant has the private key that can open up the message. Now you can fill out an online order form and include your credit-card number -- and be assured that nobody can

But some argue this sort of technique would impede impulse purchase (surely a right enshrined in the U.S. Constitution), because you need the right software to handle the encryption on your computer.

So other companies are working on the online equivalent of credit cards good at participating merchants. First, you apply for an account with one of these companies the old-fashioned way -- by telephone or postal mail.

Then, when you connect to a participating merchant and submit an order, the merchant's computer sends a message to the "credit card" computer. That computer then sends a message to you, asking you to confirm the order. One company's computer will even ask you to answer a question only you could answer (such as your mother's maiden name or your dog's name). Assuming you answer affirmatively, the transaction is then completed.

A third approach involves an attempt to create an electronic equivalent of cold, hard cash. Proponents say one of the problems with the first two approaches is that somebody, somewhere, is keeping track of who you are and what you buy. Instead, in an approach developed by a Dutch company called DigiCash, your bank essentially lets you withdraw funds into a digital account that sits on your personal computer. Then when you enter an online store that accepts this digital money, you can pay them with these funds.

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This approach, like the cryptography one, requires special software (which creates your "digital signature"), as well as an account with a participating bank

Now proponents of the last two methods argue that, ultimately, the bulk of Internet business will center not on big-ticket items such as computers or cars, but on information. Right now, information for sale tends to be very expensive and sold on the basis of high hourly rates. With the potential mass market represented by the Internet, though, people with information to sell might find it more lucrative to lower their rates and go for volume. With an all electronic system, it might become possible, say, to sell information for a small per-article or per-search charge.

Over the next few months, you'll see all three types of systems become more common in online stores. Expect some confusion as merchants and users try to figure out which system to use.

1.3 THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

1994 represented something of a watershed for the Internet -- it was the year the people who normally advertise in the back of the National Enquirer and Cosmopolitan discovered the Net.

Usenet participants found their favorite conferences filled with ads for everything from thigh-reducing cream to pornography. Canter and Siegel, a pair of lawyers in Phoenix, Ariz., gained national media attention when they flooded some 6,000 separate Usenet newsgroups with ads for a \$99 immigration service.

Now, the reason they gained such notice was not because they had done something unique (in January, 1994, a system administrator at a small college in Pennsylvania did much the same thing with postings about how the Los Angeles earthquake proved the Second Coming was imminent), but because of the reaction of Internet users. Simply, many users were outraged that no matter what newsgroup they went into, whether it was to discuss Unix programming or planning a wedding, they found the same darn ad, over and over and over. Rather than using cross-posting -- in which a person reads the message once and then has it blanked out from remaining newsgroups by his software -- they posted each message individually (well, with the help of some software) -- meaning you couldn't get away from it.

Suddenly, the once obscure Usenet phrase "to spam" (from the Monty Python skit about the restaurant that only serves the stuff) was making the pages of the New York Times. Some Usenet participants responded by posting messages on how to get the same services offered by the lawyers for free. More deluged the lawyers -- and the administrators at the system they used -- with protest messages, some 200 megabytes worth in just two days.

But what the lawyers pulled may be the last time anybody gets away with something like that. Today, numerous Usenet users stay on the alert for spamming. Using a technique known as "cancelling," they are able to wipe out such messages almost as soon as they pop up (which raises some interesting and troubling questions about the ease with which somebody else's messages can be deleted worldwide).

The moral of the story is that Internet users do not object to advertising in general, but that many feel it has a proper place -- in

online catalogs that users have to make a point of going to, not shoved down people's throats in discussion areas.

1.4 FYI

Commerce Net maintains a Web site at <http://www.commerce.net>.

You can read about Digicash's e-cash proposal at its Web site: <http://www.digicash.com>.

Open Marketplace, Inc., is developing a credit-card type of approach to commerce. You can get a look on the Web at <http://www.openmarket.com/omp.html>.

Dave Taylor's "Internet Shopping Mall" is a comprehensive listing of online stores. You can get it via anonymous FTP at <ftp.netcom.com>. Look in the /pub/Gu/Guides directory. It's also available via Gopher at <peg.cwis.uci.edu>. From the main menu, select Accessing the Internet, PEG, Internet Assistance and then Internet Shopping Mall (you may have to go down a couple of pages to get there).

If you want to discuss the online shopping experience, the imall-chat mailing list is for you. To subscribe, write to listserv@netcom.com. Leave your subject line blank, and as your message, write: subscribe imall-chat.

Bob O'Keefe at Renssalaer Polytechnic Institute maintains an extensive listing of businesses on the Net. It's available via the Web at <http://www.rpi.edu/okeefe/businss.html>.

You'll find another extensive listing at Stanford University's Yahoo site on the Web: <http://akebono.stanford.edu/yahoo/Business/Corporations>

Kent State University in Ohio maintains a repository of "Business Sources on the Net." Use gopher to connect to <refmac.kent.edu>.

Two books to take a look at are Jill Ellsworth's "The Internet Business Book" (John Wiley and Sons) and Mary Cronin's "Doing Business on the Internet" (1994, Van Nostrand Reinhold).

The alt.current-events.net-abuse Usenet newsgroup is the place to discuss spamming and other obnoxious advertising.

2 PUBLIC-ACCESS SITES

The following are new or updated listings for sites that provide Internet access.

2.1 CALIFORNIA

Cupertino. Aimnet. (408) 366-9000 (Cupertino); (415) 610-8625 (Belmont); (510) 227-8730 (Pleasanton); (415) 288-9720 (San Francisco). \$20 set-up and \$20 a month; \$25 set-up and \$20 a month for SLIP/PPP. Voice: (408) 257-0900.

2.2 NEWFOUNDLAND

St.John's. Compusult Limited. Call voice number for modem number. \$24.95 a month for 25 hours access; \$3 an hour for each additional hour. SLIP/PPP access: \$50 set-up fee; \$24.95 a month. Voice (709) 745-

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7914; Fax: (709) 745-7927.

2.3 QUEBEC

Montreal. Communications Accessibles Montreal. To start account, call voice number. \$25 month plus tax for 10 hours a week. Voice: (514) 288-2581.

2.4 TEXAS

Austin. RealTime Communications, (512) 459-4391. Log on as: new. \$80 for six months; includes SLIP access. Voice: (512) 206-3800.

3 SERVICES OF THE MONTH

3.1 CENSORSHIP

John Ockerbloom has created an online listing of books banned in the U.S. (as well as text from the books themselves) at <http://www.cs.cmu.edu:8001/Web/People/spok/banned-books.html>

3.2 GEOLOGY

VolcanoWorld is all about things that erupt in the night, and is available on the Web at <http://volcano.und.nodak.edu/>

3.3 GOVERNMENT

The U.S. Department of the Treasury, which oversees everything from printing money to going after moonshiners, has a Web server at <http://www.ustreas.gov>. One Treasury bureau is the Internal Revenue Service, which is making tax forms available online, at <http://www.ustreas.gov/treasury/bureaus/irs/irs.html>. You'll need Adobe's Acrobat form viewer, which you can get for free on this site for Windows, Macintosh and Sun Unix machines.

Not to be outdone, Her Majesty's Treasury in the U.K. is also online, with a Web and an anonymous FTP server that includes economic and treasury reports. The Web URL is <http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk> and includes a link to other government agencies; the FTP address is <ftp.hm-treasury.gov.uk>.

3.4 JEWISH LIFE

Jews-News is an electronic newsletter devoted to Jewish and Israeli news, with issues coming out two to three times a week. To subscribe, write to listserv@jerusalem1.datasrv.co.il. Leave the subject line blank, and as the message, write:

subscribe jews-news Your Name

3.5 INTERNET

If you want to see how non-computer trade journals (from travel to restaurant publications) are covering the Internet, check out Tradewinds, a monthly review of these articles written by Kenneth Liss, a librarian at the Boston Public Library's Kirstein Business Branch. It's available via anonymous ftp at <ftp.std.com> in the /periodicals/TRADEWINDS directory, and by gopher at <gopher.std.com> (from the main menu, select Periodicals and then TRADEWINDS).

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