

A Brief Introduction To E-Commerce

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Electronic commerce, or "e-commerce," is one of the biggest buzzwords in today's business world. But don't let the frenzy that surrounds e-commerce intimidate you. In its simplest form, e-commerce just means taking things that your company is already doing in person, through the mail, or over the telephone, and doing those things in a new place--on the Internet. It may seem special now, but in a few short years it'll be just another part of how every company does business. In fact, we're rapidly headed for a time when businesses that aren't on the Internet will be as far out of the mainstream as a business without a telephone number is today.

Businesses can do things with e-commerce that would be prohibitively expensive or logistically difficult to do through older channels of commerce. A Web site is naturally a 24-hour-a-day operation, unlike a traditional 9-to-5 company. It is much easier to keep a Web site up to date with all your company and product information than it is to do the same thing with print materials. And the interactivity and completeness of an e-commerce Web site can engage customers more directly, giving them a feeling of empowerment and control that is difficult to duplicate through other methods of doing business.

An obvious parallel can be drawn to the introduction of the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog just over a hundred years ago. Suddenly, everyone within reach of the U.S. Mail had easy access to an amazingly broad range of products at reasonable prices. The company's sales exploded as millions of customers took advantage of this simple and engaging new way of selecting and purchasing products. Sears wasn't selling anything you couldn't buy from a regular brick-and-mortar store if you had the time to get to one, but it was doing the selling in a new place: the customer's home.

Just as Sears used the U.S. Mail to make all of America its market, businesses today are using e-commerce to open their doors to the entire world. And as people are exposed to the world of instant response that e-commerce makes possible, they are starting to expect that kind of connection with more and more of the businesses with which they deal. Many people prefer booking their travel online rather than talking to a travel agent or buying their theater tickets over the Internet rather than standing in line at a box office. These people welcome the ability to evaluate and buy products on their own schedules rather than on someone else's.

Not every business will be able to take full advantage of e-commerce right away. Few companies have built their existing data systems with the idea that it would be necessary to give the outside world access to any part of those systems. Busy small companies may find it difficult to set aside the time necessary to define and implement e-commerce in a way that makes sense for the way they do business. But at the very least, companies should keep the possibility of future electronic commerce plans in mind when they start new initiatives or products.

BASIS is beginning to take its first steps towards e-commerce. We will start by making it

possible for our international product distributors to access our internal databases to look up the licenses they've purchased. We will also process their changes to those licenses, such as adding users or upgrading the product to the latest revision, and request replacement media for the product. This initial distributor-only rollout will allow us to judge how a small audience uses the features we will provide so we can refine and improve those features before making them available to the rest of the world.

We'll be discussing e-commerce and Internet selling solutions at TechCon99. You'll also see and hear about our own prototype implementation.