

The Annis Group Builds E-Business on BASIS

By Win Quigley

How quickly times change. In 1994, when The Annis Group built its first Web site, for the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC), a 35,000-member association, there was almost no interest in the Internet or electronic business anywhere. The power of the Web we take so much for granted was not at all obvious just six years ago. David Annis, Vice President of The Annis Group, had a hunch the Web was going to matter some day, and he persuaded the ICSC, one of his clients, to give it a try.

Today, The Annis Group has built or is in the process of building 125 Web sites. Just about all of them are built with BASIS products.

The ICSC site was first built with PERL, C and BBx®. "BBx was a lot easier to maintain and worked faster than PERL or C," David said. Since 1994, all of the C and most of the PERL code has been replaced with BBx.

The Annis Group, founded in 1964, provides facilities management services - MIS for firms that don't want their own IS group. Many of the firms it services are in property management and cemetery management. Revenue has doubled in the last 12 months with most of the increase attributable to Web-based projects. How has The Annis Group's Web-related business gone from zero to the driving force behind its expansion in just six years?

"The Customers are looking for sales. It's a very easy way to drive sales. It's a low-cost way of serving the Customer better," David explained.

Most of the sites The Annis Group builds are designed to provide automated services over the Web. David believes the firm's best work is done for associations, such as the ICSC and the Direct Marketing Association.

A look at www.icsc.org shows you what can be done. The graphics on the pages are created using HTML. Clicking on the newswire headlines on the home page connects you to a BBx routine that puts the news story, stored on a form, on to the page. BBx goes to the database and pulls up the story. The visitor can personalize the site so he sees only the information he wants. Messages are targeted at members. The BBx programs remember the visitor's preferences from visit to visit. BBx programs accessed through the site let members register for meetings and let visitors purchase memberships. The ICSC site generated \$4 million in sales to the organization last year.

David likes to use BASIS' Basic Web Utility, modified and extended by The Annis Group, to link the user to databases. "Anything you can do in the database, you can now do on the Web," David said. "Database-driven sites are better than static sites. BBx is a fast way of getting there."

For David, fast development is essential. The ICSC site took 90 days to build. A Web-based shopping cart for American Gourmet (www.agourmet.com), a specialty foods business, took 30 days.

"There's nothing hard about it. You need to pick up how the Web works – things like HTTP and SSL – but it's no harder than networking printers," David said.

The hard part, David said, comes before you write a line of code. The developer needs to learn everything possible about the client's business, the client's Customers and the services the client wants to provide over the Web. "I learn your business to give you a new way to do things. The biggest hurdle I find is it's a lot more difficult to think through the services and the business you're in than people envision. To do it right takes time and effort. Lots of decisions have to be made."

Much of the effort goes into defining exactly what functionality the Web site is going to have. An association Web site, for example, has to deliver certain data to certain people but not to others. Decisions have to be made about what information and services are offered to whom. Decisions have to be made about how to deal with a prospect, a real Customer and someone who is just passing through. Once the process begins, David says, the client will often discover he or she isn't at all sure what the goal is. Helping clients understand that is a big part of the developer's job.

"You have to keep in mind you're entering a new business," David said. "This is a new way to sell, service and gather information. I'm almost building a parallel business on the Web, sometimes the entire business on the Web. You have to think it through just as you would any new business."

The next step for The Annis Group is implementing BBj®. David is grateful the investment he's made in BBx will be protected as he migrates his utilities and applications to BBj. He's looking forward to being able to deploy Business Basic programs as applets in Web browsers, using BBj. Since Java is Web-centric by nature, The Annis Group expects BBj applications to be well-behaved residents of the Web. The Annis Group programming staff is also beginning to tackle Java programming.

David is excited about the prospect of integrating Java objects into BBj, taking advantage of the power of each programming language in the body of the same program. "We expect to get the best of both worlds," he says.

