

Recap and Commentary  
June Cluster - Spring 1999

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An Abstract of a Paper Submitted to Nova Southeastern University  
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The instructor and students attending the June Cluster for DISS 790/890 - Electronic Commerce on the Internet created a relaxed and enjoyable environment that promoted learning. The June cluster session began as each student introduced him/herself to the class. During the next three days, class discussions focused on a wide range of electronic commerce topics. These included the levenger.com Internet site, Internet marketing, electronic payment systems, security issues, and legal issues. In the following pages, a few of the lessons learned during the three days of the cluster session were summarized and then related to the author's personal experience.

## Recap and Commentary

### June Cluster - Spring 1999

The June cluster session began as each student introduced him/herself to the class. The purpose of this exercise was not so much to acquaint the students with one another but to put a face with the names that everyone had become familiar with during WWWBoard postings over the last three months. The shared experiences of the students and the instructor (i.e. completion of the written assignments and WWWBoard participation) resulted in an atmosphere that was both exciting and fun. During the next three days, class discussions focused on a wide range of electronic commerce topics. These included the levenger.com Internet site, Internet marketing, electronic payment systems, security issues, and legal issues. In the following pages, a few of the lessons learned during the three days of the cluster session are summarized and then related to my own experience.

### Day One

Although the first day of the cluster was abbreviated, it set the tone for the entire weekend (i.e. fast paced, interesting, and enjoyable). The instructor began with a review of the topics covered thus far in the course. These included the history of the Internet, the Web, Intranets/Extranets, EDI, and online business models. Following this brief review, a discussion of the subjects to be covered in the last half of the term was conducted. The topics included were online businesses, Internet marketing, electronic payment systems, security issues, and legal issues.

The class talked briefly about the Web site of a small Iowa brick supplier. Businesses of all sizes are establishing a Web presence. Even businesses that do not conduct transactions over their Internet sites see the Internet as a way to attract customers, answer customer questions, reduce phone calls, advertise inexpensively, and even earn tax credits. I performed an Internet search for Iowa brick company Internet sites and was surprised by the results. Instead of finding "mom and pop" brickyards, one of the companies located was the Sioux City Brick and Tile Company (Sioux City Brick, 1999).

Sioux City Brick's Web site gave a comprehensive picture of the size and sophistication of the company's operations. The automated manufacturing plant included robotic setting machines with production capabilities of 28,000 bricks per hour. Another page outlined the top ten reasons to build with clay (Iowa clay) brick masonry. American Axle and Manufacturing (AAM), the company I work for, has a similarly designed site with automobile axles and forgings substituted for clay bricks (AAM, 1999). Both company Web sites are unexpected examples of the Internet and electronic commerce utilized to remain competitive in today's business environment.

In the second half of the first day, Karen Fortner of levenger.com gave an interesting presentation that highlighted the company's transition to electronic commerce on the Internet. Levenger's customer base is composed of older professional men and women. As a result, Levenger's catalog and online products are selected to suit their particular tastes and needs. For example, Karen discussed the company's recent partnership with

Barnes and Noble and NuvoMedia in promoting the Rocket eBook. Since May, Levenger has sold 2,000 of these electronic books (Stoffman, 1999). Not surprisingly, one of the eBook's selling points is its ability to display large font sizes. Levenger also offers a complete line of magnifying glasses for the older traditional book readers.

Karen also explained Levenger's habit of developing new product ideas that have their origins in antiques. "We used to have something called the Bettman Magnifier, in honor of the photographer Otto Bettman, that was an old-fashioned wooden thing on a stand," Fortner was recently quoted in the Minneapolis Star Tribune (Nobel, 1999). "The new ones are a little funkier."

Levenger recently added a corporate section to the Levenger site (Levenger, 1999). The new Web pages allow business people to shop online and purchase executive gifts monogrammed with a company's logo, individual initials, or a personalized message. Products included in the online corporate catalog are leather items, desk accessories, and fine writing instruments. As AAM continues to test the benefits of doing business online on the Internet, an integration of the Levenger corporate Web site with the AAM intranet would prove beneficial to both companies.

## Day Two

The second day of the cluster weekend began with a discussion of Karen Fortner's Levenger presentation. Most memorable was Karen's use (or misuse) of the word geek. I was not aware of it until the instructor commented on Karen's misunderstanding. The day continued with a discussion of Web site maintenance. Questions related to the why, what, who, and when were used to format the subsequent lecture and discussion.

One of the exercises on the second day entailed breaking the class into six discussion groups. The six groups met separately to discuss the article *Making Business Sense of the Internet* by Shikhar Ghosh (Ghosh, 1998). After the individual discussion period, the groups presented their interpretation of the article in a statement of twenty-five words or less. Group four (the group I was in) related the article to Levenger's need to go beyond its current catalog-based content and establish an enhanced "digital value" for its online customers. Online businesses such as amazon.com have become my favorites because of the "digital value" they offer. Levenger's recent launch of a corporate section is a step in the right direction.

I was surprised to see how each of the groups interpreted the article differently. This gave me a greater understanding of why one of the greatest strengths of electronic commerce over the Internet is its ability to be customized to fit the needs of a person or a group. Recent examples of this are the personal web pages available to users of the Yahoo portal (Yahoo, 1999).

## Day Three

On the third and last day of the cluster weekend, the instructor covered topics that included Internet legal issues, electronic payment systems, and security issues. Also

discussed were the risks of doing business online. These include risks from people, enemies, data contamination, theft, masquerading Web sites, and viruses. In response to this discussion and the recent outbreak of the Worm.Explore.Zip virus, I recently ordered the latest release of the McAfee antivirus program from their Internet site (Symantec, 1999). The Worm.Explore.Zip virus erases a number of file types (e.g. the .doc file that this paper is saved as).

During one of the break periods on the third day, I mentioned the effort required to prepare bibliographies to a couple of senior classmates (DISS 790 was their last class). They recommended using one of the Windows-based bibliography programs that are now available. The recommended programs were Endnote and Reference Manager. Due to a recent merger of Niles Software and RSI, both were available from a new company called ISI ResearchSoft (ISI ResearchSoft, 1999). After performing extensive online research and downloading the trial versions of each program, I ordered a copy of Endnote (student cost \$99) from [www.endnote.com](http://www.endnote.com). This new tool should prove to be invaluable during the completion of my remaining coursework as well as the annotated bibliography required for the Dissertation.

### Informal Activities

In addition to the knowledge gained during the cluster's scheduled classroom sessions, the value of the weekend was greatly enhanced by a number of informal activities. These included the SCIS student and faculty luncheon, Dr. Lieblein's insight into the dissertation process, and Dr. Manning's presentation relating to creativity in the dissertation process. Also important to the cluster process was the information acquired by "rubbing elbows" with other students. The following is a brief summary of the informal activities in which I participated during the June cluster session.

First, the SCIS student and faculty luncheon gave everyone a chance to meet old friends and make some new ones. Topics covered during these casual luncheon discussions centered around making the Ph.D. process as rewarding and painless as possible. These included the type and quantity of assignments in upcoming courses along with detailed descriptions of the teaching styles and requirements of the different instructors. I found these informal information exchanges rewarding because they answered many questions and allowed me to share personal observations and "tricks of the trade" with other students.

The second informal activity was Dr. Lieblein's candid discussion of SCIS dissertation requirements. His comments included the fact that the subject must fit with the particular degree that is being pursued. He gave examples of cases in which students were required to either change topics or degree majors because they did not understand this simple principle. His advice also included the use of a dissertation topic journal. The journal's purpose is to organize possible dissertation topic ideas. I subsequently created one, and I am now trying to remember past ideas that I failed to write down.

The last informal activity was Dr. Manning's presentation on creativity in the dissertation process. His demonstration of a five picture visual technique to stimulate a person's

creativity and problem solving abilities was quite compelling. I plan to use it to assist me in choosing a topic for the seventh DISS 790 assignment and the SCIS dissertation.

## Conclusion

In summary, the June cluster gave a brief overview of the electronic commerce topics to be covered in the last half of the term. The cluster also provided the opportunity to meet and discuss ideas with other SCIS students and the instructor. The lecture and discussions were fast paced, lively, and very interesting. I appreciated the extra effort it took the instructor to coordinate the presentation by Karen Fortner of Levenger. It was well worth her time and effort.

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