

E-Commerce Times

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The rapid growth of electronic commerce has stimulated the creation of numerous electronic commerce resources. Unlike the traditional services available to brick-and-mortar businesses, these online resources are fast, easy, and focused on issues specific to companies doing business on the Internet. One of these resources, the E-Commerce Times, was recently picked as the number one electronic commerce resource on the Internet by TopTenLinks.com. The E-Commerce Times achieved this number one status by excelling in the areas of content quality, overall speed, consistent style, ease of navigation, artistic design, and interaction. In the following pages, this paper provided an in-depth look at the E-Commerce Times. The paper began with a brief discussion of the TopTenLinks weekly newsletter and its current top ten electronic commerce resources. This was followed by a profile of the more than five million people that visit the E-Commerce Times site monthly. Next, a detailed description was given of the site's major sections followed by a comparison with traditional business resources. In conclusion, the paper discussed why electronic commerce entrepreneurs require such an advanced business resource when traditional businesses survive without them.

E-Commerce Times

The rapid growth of electronic commerce has stimulated the creation of numerous electronic commerce resources. Unlike the traditional services available to brick-and-mortar businesses, these online resources are fast, easy, and focused on issues specific to companies doing business on the Internet. One of these resources, the E-Commerce Times, was recently picked as the number one electronic commerce resource on the Internet by TopTenLinks.com (TopTenLinks, 1999). The E-Commerce Times achieved this number one status by excelling in the areas of content quality, overall speed, consistent style, ease of navigation, artistic design, and interaction.

The content quality of E-Commerce Times is high because the information provided is valuable to electronic commerce professionals. Content is also kept current with daily updates. The efficient use of graphics, plug-ins, banners, and compatible technologies ensure that the site's pages load quickly. Also important to E-Commerce Times' number one ranking is its overall look and feel and the consistent style applied from page to page. Site backgrounds, borders, banners, navigation bars, and fonts are consistent throughout the site. This consistent style also contributes to the site's ease of navigation. Navigational links are placed in similar locations on each page, and links back to the home page are always available.

Perhaps even more important than the positive characteristics listed above, the E-Commerce Times site is artistically pleasing to the eye. Site graphics create an environment that visitors want to explore. Also important to the site's popularity is the promotion of user interaction by such features as eQuiz, WWWBoard, and the electronic commerce search engine.

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Top Ten

The selection of the most appropriate electronic commerce resource is made easier by an online survey database called TopTenLinks. TopTenLinks is a free weekly newsletter E-mailed to anyone wishing information about top ten lists. The resource's more than 700 lists are organized into 22 channels that include the arts, business, computers, government, health, hobbies, science, and travel (TopTenLinks, 1999). Visitors vote on sites they like and dislike. Based upon these votes, sites in each of the top ten lists are updated and sorted from one to ten.

The electronic commerce section of the TopTenLinks' business channel includes links to the top ten electronic commerce resources along with their rankings. The factors used in determining a site's ranking include content quality, overall speed, consistent style, ease of navigation, artistic design, and interaction. The following is the current list of top ten electronic commerce resources from the site (TopTenLinks, 1999):

1. E-Commerce Times
2. Electronic Commerce Guide
3. CommerceNet
4. NetBusiness
5. allECommerce
6. Thomson EC Resources
7. ZDNet E-Business
8. Internet Commerce Expo
9. eCommerce Alert
10. eMarketer

The E-Commerce Times resource is currently in the number one position. In the following pages, this paper explores a few of the reasons for this ranking.

Number One

The E-Commerce Times is a free online publication containing daily news and feature articles for anyone interested in doing business on the Internet. The editorial content of the site is dedicated 100 percent to electronic commerce (E-Commerce Times, 1999). Coverage includes everything from daily news and success stories, to feature articles, product guides, newsmaker profiles, and an electronic commerce events calendar and message board. Online readers come from four major groups:

- Corporate management and decision-makers, including information systems and marketing professionals, CEOs, CFOs, and other high-level managers
- Internet service providers and commercial hosting services offering electronic commerce services
- Small businesses and entrepreneurs interested in selling products and services over the Internet
- Industry analysts and venture capitalists covering the electronic commerce market

The E-Commerce Times' mission is to provide readers with the single best source of independent and up-to-date information dealing with electronic commerce. In addition, the online publication seeks to help readers increase their online business by leveraging the successes and avoiding the mistakes of other companies in the industry. The

following is a discussion of the publications' major sections. These sections include Front Page and News, Product and Services Guide, Special Reports and Small Business Advisor, Success Stories, Message Board, Event Calendar, and eQuiz.

Front Page and News

The Front Page and News section contains news headlines and stories that are updated daily, Monday through Friday. Coverage typically includes trends in the industry, new products, earnings reports, and business deals that are relevant to electronic commerce. All new and old news stories are easily found through the site's search engine. This is perhaps the most powerful tool provided to anyone researching electronic commerce companies or topics. Banner advertising is mixed-in throughout this section. This gives advertisers frequent exposure to industry analysts, venture capitalists, Internet service providers, and small businesses and entrepreneurs.

The May 3, 1999 edition reported the details of IBM's new electronic commerce center now under construction in Poughkeepsie, New York (E-Commerce Times, 1999). The center will provide powerful computers and software along with engineering and design consultants to aid customers in developing new online products and services. Another article posted that day presented the details of Virgin Entertainment Group's launch of its online megastore. The site, which carries the same products as Virgin's brick-and-mortar megastores, will compete directly with Amazon.com.

Also included in the Front Page and News sections are newsmaker stories intended to provide an inside perspective on the people behind the news. Articles focus on the movers and shakers of the electronic commerce industry. Companies advertise in this section in order to reach electronic commerce power players, industry analysts, and investors. The E-Commerce Times news headlines are also available under syndication to thousands of affiliates worldwide (Galati & Geller, 1999).

Products and Services Guide

The Product and Services Guide is an extensive resource for electronic commerce businesses. As one of the most trafficked areas of the E-Commerce Times, this section provides information and direct links to a varied collection of electronic business tools (E-Commerce Times, 1999). The tool categories covered in this section are new products, store software, payment systems, security services, hosting services, and electronic commerce malls. Banner advertising in this section is targeted on the decision-makers at large corporate sites as well as individual entrepreneurs.

New Products.

The New Products section of the Products and Services Guide assists readers in staying current on technological improvements to electronic commerce products and services. New products featured in the May 3, 1999 edition included (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- Active Commerce Software - a package designed to assist manufacturers, retailers, and distributors create fully functional business-to-business or business-to-consumer electronic commerce solutions. The application helps businesses increase revenue, create new sales channels, and reduce transaction expenses.
- IC Shopper - a complete business-to-consumer electronic commerce solution. The program's capabilities included shopping lists, shopping cart, intelligent search, member profiler, and built-in marketing capabilities.
- iTool - an online turn-key solution for businesses building and managing an Internet site. The package includes database connectivity and development tools, domain name management, and an online Web page editor.

Store Software.

The Store Software section of the Products and Services Guide describes a wide variety of software programs designed to help build functional electronic commerce storefronts. Packages discussed in this section range from simple applications with easy set-up to full-featured programs that are scalable as a business grows. A few of the store applications listed in the May 3, 1999 edition were (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- EasyCart - an easy to configure shopping cart program that handles both large and small customer orders.
- Microsoft Site Server 3.0 Commerce Edition - a comprehensive package that allows businesses to conduct secure online transactions. The software is designed for easy integration with existing inventory, accounting, and EDI systems. It also provides tools that allow business managers to analyze customer usage data.
- Net.Commerce - a searchable electronic catalog from IBM. Net.Commerce provides all the tools required to conduct business on the Internet. The product's features include dynamically updated prices and product specifications linked to a merchant's online catalog. The program also provides the merchant with order status, customer account history, and payment and shipping information.

Payment Processing Systems.

The Payment Processing Systems section of the Product and Services Guide provides readers with a guided tour of the many payment options available to online businesses. The following are a few of the systems presented (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- iBill - an electronic commerce payment processor provides online businesses with real-time credit card processing, phone billing, detailed business reporting, and client services. These services are easy to integrate and are usually up and running in 48 hours.

- InstaBuy - a payment processing system was the first service to use CyberCash's secure Agile Wallet technology. InstaBuy allows electronic businesses to offer customers a secure and convenient way to pay for online purchases. Along with the benefit of increasing consumer confidence, the service also streamlines the whole payment process.
- vWallet - a software program that provides a user friendly graphical interface that allows customers to point and click (without having to re-enter credit card data) to make payments. The program's receipt manager also files the purchase receipts and exports the information into personal finance programs such as Quicken and MS Money.

Security Services.

The Security Services section of the Product and Services Guide addresses a major concern of both online merchants and online shoppers. Included in this section are consulting firms that aid electronic businesses in securely processing and storing customer purchasing records and credit card information. The following are a few of the services profiled (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- AIC Interchanges - a network security company that supports AltaVista Firewall 97 for secure access to the Internet, intranets, extranets, and VPNs. The company's services also include management consulting, e-commerce setup, and Web site development.
- CorpNet Security - a consulting company specializing in information and Internet security. Services include vulnerability assessments, information security architecture design, and security policy design and implementation.
- NJH Security Consulting - a firm providing secure UNIX development and consulting. The company's emphasis is on Internet penetration testing, Internet security, and multilevel systems. Security services include audits, remote scans, policy verification, and contract programming.

E-Commerce Hosting Services.

The E-Commerce Hosting Services section of the Product and Services Guide is a compilation of firms that offer electronic business hosting services. Services offered by these firms go far beyond simple Internet access and storage space. The following are a couple of examples of the electronic commerce hosting companies and the comprehensive services provided (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- InfoQuest Technologies - an electronic commerce Web hosting company whose list of supported products include FrontPage, Drumbeat, Net Objects Fusion, Dreamweaver, Cold Fusion, Pagemill, and FTP access. Company services include consulting and design services.

- MindSpring - a hosting services company that specializes in the support of Mercantec SoftCart and Microsoft FrontPage for electronic commerce. The company's services also include round-the-clock technical support, domain name registration, Real Audio, CGI scripting, database connectivity, site management, turnkey hosting solutions, and site access statistics.

E-Commerce Malls.

The E-Commerce Mall section of the Product and Services Guide focuses on the recent proliferation of online malls as a place to host an electronic business. These growing hosting services offer businesses turnkey solutions for store creation, payment processing, and site management. The following are a few of the examples presented (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- GeoCities' GeoShops - GeoShops is a new service of GeoCities (best known for hosting free personal home pages). The core of the service is a partnership between GeoCities and Internet Commerce Services Corporation. Together, they allow merchants to create complete storefronts without having to know HTML. Merchants are also able to track account statistics, process sales, and interact with other storeowners. GeoShops also provides a complete suite of file manager tools with each site.
- iMall - the largest shopping mall on the Internet hosts more than 1,600 storefronts and has millions of visitors monthly. Storefronts are equipped with secure, real-time credit card processing, merchant account services, order processing, shopping cart, backroom services, and product database management.
- Yahoo! Store - an electronic commerce mall that allows merchants to set up an online store in less than ten minutes without having any knowledge of HTML. The shopping cart included with each store displays the sale price of products along with quantity discounts where applicable. The store also provides tracking tools that allow a merchant to profile a shopper's specific habits.

Special Reports and Small business Advisor

The Special Reports and Small Business Advisor sections provide practical information designed to help online businesses become successful. Both the E-Commerce Times staff and selected industry experts contribute articles. The following are a few examples of the feature stories from these sections (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- Selling on the Internet: How to Get Started and How Much Does it Cost?
- The Seven Deadly Sins of E-Commerce
- Planning for the Perfect Online Store

- Safety First! Secure Online Credit Card Transactions

Advertising in these sections is directed toward serious buyers as they search for practical advice on running their electronic commerce businesses. These advertisements typically promote items such as site hosting services, shopping cart software, site promotion services, payment solutions, and fulfillment services.

Success Stories

In the Success Stories section, the E-Commerce Times reports the real-life experiences of individuals and companies selling online. Articles in this section help readers discover the characteristics of successful online businesses. Discovery takes place by providing a collection of practical advice, insight, and "inside information." Banner ads located in this section target corporate decision makers responsible for the development and success of their company's electronic commerce site.

The success story in the May 3, 1999 issue was an exclusive interview with Peter Adler, the president of Shades.com and Swiss Army Depot (E-Commerce Times, 1999). The interview began with a brief history of both companies along with a discussion of the products and services sold online. Adler also discussed the important factors contributing to the success of his sites. This was followed by a discussion of the downsides and pitfalls he experienced along the way. The interview finished with a look at the software products used to create the sites along with a little advice for beginners interested in selling on the Internet.

Message Board

The Message Board section of the site is intended for messages and discussions relating to Internet business and technology issues. The Message Board employs the popular WWWBoard engine currently used for messaging by many sites (including the DISS 790 Cluster at Nova Southeastern University). Active discussions during May of 1999 included (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- Cost of setting up an electronic commerce Web site
- Melissa virus immunity
- Linux -- A real alternative
- Dell ? Amazon hookup
- Yahoo store and Yahoo shopping
- Venture capital firm needs management talent for E-commerce startup

- eCommerce sales tax
- Start your own online business

Advertisements and other commercial notices are not allowed in this area of the E-Commerce Times.

Event Calendar

The Event Calendar provides visitors with a list of upcoming tradeshows and conferences that are of particular interest to electronic commerce professionals. Events listed in May of 1999 included (E-Commerce Times, 1999):

- Oracle E-commerce Internet Seminars (online) [May 11]
- Consumer Electronics Manufacturers Association's - Retailing and the Internet [May 18]
- Internet World - China [May 18-20]
- Internet World - London [May 25-27]
- The 1999 Global Internet Performance Conference: Optimizing Web-site Quality of Service for E-Commerce [May 26-28]

Advertisers in this section use top and side banners to make their conference or tradeshow stand out. Advertising also promotes e-commerce seminars, books, training services, and newsletters.

eQuiz

eQuiz, a recent addition to the E-Commerce Times, provides an at-a-glance analysis of the online marketing statistics that appear in reports provided by eMarketer. E-Commerce Times and eMarketer recently formed an alliance allowing this information to be posted on the E-Commerce Times site (Galati & Geller, 1999). eMarketer is recognized worldwide as an authority on business online. Its award-winning Internet site is visited by hundreds of thousands of e-marketers from over 80 countries. One of the eQuizes from the May 3, 1999 issue asked what percentage of Internet ad revenues would go into sponsorships by 2001 - the answer was 58 percent (E-Commerce Times, 1999).

Traditional Business Resources

Electronic commerce resources such as the E-Commerce Times are similar to traditional business resources in that both provide business critical information. Entrepreneurs, by nature, crave any information that will increase the probability of their success. While the content provided by the E-Commerce Times (e.g. business advice and success stories) is

similar to that provided by the Small Business Administration and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the method of delivery is quite different.

For example, the Small Business Administration provides resources that include training and one-on-one counseling given by retired business executives (Small Business Administration, 1999). Other services include help in starting a business, developing a business plan, and financing a business. Another example of a traditional business resource is the Small Business Institute of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. The Small Business Institute provides businesses with training courses, marketing information, financial advice, and a catalog of business related textbooks (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 1999). Although these traditional resources provide information essential to a business' success, their method of delivery is not real time as is the case with electronic resources. Unlike traditional services, online resources are fast, easy, and focused on issues specific to companies doing business on the Internet.

Conclusion

Why do online businesses require an advanced business resource such as the E-Commerce Times when traditional businesses survive without them? Although an electronic commerce business can be started with only \$100 and a personal computer, experts warn that online businesses have many problems not encountered by traditional businesses (Stansel, 1999). Online businesses must contend with issues that are unique to the Internet. These problems include registering a domain name, hosting and managing an Internet site, online credit card processing, and establishing secure online transactions.

Electronic commerce resources such as the E-Commerce Times provide assistance with these unique problems. As described in above sections, the E-commerce Times furnishes online businesses with critical real-time information not available from traditional business resources.

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