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**Enterprise Portals – The Next Big Thing**

**By Paul Brassil**

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Just when you finally got comfortable with the transformation of the Web from a simple server of static HTML to a complex application centered in B2C and B2B concepts, along comes the latest in E-Business initiatives – the Enterprise Portal. Enterprise Portals are Extranets developed by companies to satisfy secure communications with their customers, partners, and employees, and it's an idea whose time has certainly come. Both big companies and small have discovered the multifaceted value of such systems, and it's only a matter of time before they will be the main channel of communication between companies and their customers.

The history of the web for many companies has been interesting in the lack of planning and focus. Companies were reluctant to go on the web at first due to concerns with the permanence of the Internet. By the end of the 1990's, however, departmental web sites were popping up throughout the corporate world, and the prevailing impression was that the more stovepipe web sites a company could build the better. Soon, corporations were faced with a confusing glut of Intra/Extra/Internet sites that tended to defy a consistent branding, offer overlapping functionality, and require users to amass a large number of login accounts. The goal of an Enterprise Portal is to collapse these disparate corporate web sites into a single entry point into the company, offering users a consistent brand, a single login, and reliable access to the wealth of a company's offerings.

So, what are some of the features found in these Enterprise Portals? Customers might use an Enterprise Portal for accessing product information, sign up for training and view course offerings, leverage service features such as on-line call center interactions or software distribution features, register for a company sponsored conference, or simply access the company's online commerce offerings. Partners might use the site to strengthen channel ties, download content to extend the relationship, or collaborate online with the company on new programs. Employees would use the site as they would the company Intranet, with the benefit of using traditional Intranet features outside the firewall (like checking email). Across all these users, Enterprise Portals offer established "Portal" features such as industry news, event calendars, and user preferences to promote return visits and longer sessions.

Enterprise Portals often leverage the best of personalization and one-to-one marketing, allowing for the targeting of content and message to unique individuals. Thus, a customer might have access to product manuals or white papers that a partner would not be able to see. At the same time, the portals often rely on sophisticated CRM and campaign management systems in the implicit and explicit personalization and communications of the site, allowing the company to interact with its customers and partners in better and more lucrative ways. Finally, Enterprise Portals offer amazing analytical data to companies about their customers and partners via direct feedback utilities, or the tracking of usage and navigation of the site (and the implications of what their users are interested in).

In order to offer up such versatile functionality, Enterprise Portals are increasingly built on sophisticated development technologies. Often they'll have at their heart a complex application server/personalization engine such Broadvision One-To-One, ATG Dynamo, or BEA Weblogic.

Additionally, Enterprise Portals many times need to integrate with backend legacy systems, requiring a robust and scalable EAI (Enterprise Application Integration) architecture. Open systems languages such as Java and XML make this easier by reducing proprietary interfaces and inconsistent standards.

Obviously, building a system that could be compared to a mini-ERP implementation is never easy, and the business process and data issues involved in constructing an Enterprise Portal are as complex as any of the application development issues. With that said, companies recognize the operational efficiencies, cost savings, and potential revenue offerings of such sites, and it's only a matter of time before Enterprise Portals are as ubiquitous as the company 1-800 phone number.

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### **Vertical Portals: The Hottest New Trend on the Net?**

**By Richard Benvin**

#### **Vertical Portals: The Hottest New Trend on the Net? by Richard Benvin**

The Internet continues it's explosive growth in all directions, so you would think that identifying a hot opportunity would be a simple matter. The reality, however, is that most netpreneurs still struggle to make a living on the Net, while a relative few hit the big time.

In an environment where technology and markets swirl around each other like a cyclone, getting caught up in a virtuous spiral is a matter of following natural forces. Some ideas, no matter how obvious, simply won't fly until their time has come.

Take vertical portals, for example. Lately, they are being touted as one of the hottest new trends for commerce on the Web. Vertical portals aren't really a new

concept—just an idea that's time has come.

For those who aren't familiar with the term, "vertical portals" are web sites that serve as guides or directories for specific topics on the Web. Sites like Yahoo! are called "portals" because they provide an entry point to the wide open world of the Web. The major portals provide much needed structure to the Web. However, a web surfer who is interested in a specific subject –pro tennis, for example– would soon find that there are extensive resources and communities just around that subject. (See

. The "horizontal" or general portals like Yahoo! can't possibly keep up with every possible topic.

That's where vertical portals come in. Vertical portals are typically run by people with an interest in a particular subject. These people proactively seek out the content and community around that subject, and organize it with a level of care and skill that general portals simply can't match. They are a natural element of the Web. And guess what– they aren't new.

Vertical portals have been around from the start. So why are they suddenly so hot? Two words–Economic Viability. Whereas vertical portals used to be nothing but a time– sink for those who operated them, they are now being turned into income generating machines. Their time has come. Here are some of the dynamics combining to make vertical portals a great opportunity now.

1. Increased traffic – It was just a matter of time before enough people came on to the Web to reach a critical mass. We're there.
2. Consumer Confidence – Not only are multitudes now surfing, but they are increasingly feeling confident about purchasing online. Concerns about credit card scams and security are fading, and digital commerce is starting to flow freely.
3. Easy Ecommerce – Setting up a system to make sales on the Internet used to be a major technological hurdle. But with standardized and very affordable ecommerce programs now available, virtually anyone can set up a shop within their vertical portal.
4. Affiliate Programs – Even if the site owner doesn't have products of their own to sell, they can get set up with affiliate programs and sell a wide range of products specifically targeted to their audience.

One program, [href="http://www.absoluteauthority.com/frame.cfm?sponsor=rbenvin">Absolute Authority](http://www.absoluteauthority.com/frame.cfm?sponsor=rbenvin) actually provides a system for people to easily create their own

vertical portals and plug in affiliate programs through a user–friendly interface. By building a vast network of vertical portals under a common umbrella, Absolute Authority plans to capture mind share in this key area of the Web. They are currently accepting applications for specific topics.

In the dynamic world of the Web, timing is everything. Fortunes will be made in the years to come, but only by those who keep pace and move when the time is right.



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