

## How I became a WebMama.

by Barbara C. Coll

### The Vision...

"Let's use the Web for everything", CEO Brian NeSmith was preaching to the Ipsilon Networks' original cast of 12 engineers, 1 office manager, and me. The argument was convincing; use the World Wide Web on the Internet for all internal and external communications, and we will need less people. Less people in support to answer trivial questions because all information will be at the customer's fingertips. Less people in field sales to make cold calls on new prospects because people will find us through the Web. Less material in marketing since we could distribute literature electronically. Software distribution, product documen-

tation, sales order status, support call tracking, internal project management, benefits information, personal home pages for all employees — all on the Web.

Ipsilon Networks was founded on the principal that the networking protocol IP will continue to grow in use and would eventually rule the world. IP is the protocol backbone of the Internet. So we all headed out to look at tools and applications to make our part of the Ipsilon Web site come alive.

### Who's in Charge?

Sure, we talked about the structure and implementation of our home pages (mostly around the water cooler, and it was all talk). Company announcement date was 5 months away and as marketing manager I knew the Web site needed to be live by then. Representatives from every division of the company (we were about 20 people at the time so almost everyone was present) attended the meeting I called to get things moving. People were starting to question the vision and understand some realities: Could we really expect all customers to interact with us via the Web, including purchasing officers? Defining the Web meant defining Ipsilon's organization and data infrastructures (For example, implementing the vision required that customers and sales have access to the accounting database!) Web tools/structures didn't exist yet or were in testing phases. This was a huge project, and nobody was really in charge. Whomever implemented the vision would span all divisions of a traditional organization. This was development of a new media for communications and not a position found on the traditional organizational chart.

### How the Ipsilon Web site really came together.

As each group analyzed the tools in their areas it became obvious that some functional areas were "Webby" or Web-aware and some weren't. Our engineering group was playing with MBONE traffic and knew the details of IP networks because we were in the router/switch business. But, anything that looked like "marketing" was unacceptable to them.

The Ipsilon home page was more and more often the

first impression a customer was to have of our company. No longer the first sales call or company brochure but the Web site would be sought out as soon as they heard or read about Ipsilon. Marketing had to take the lead. Because we were a start-up, with limited resources, I decided to unilaterally decide on data structure, look & feel, major content areas, and how visitors would navigate through our site. If I had taken the time to get group consensus on the look & feel and structure I believe it would have been a 1 year project. In the end it took 3 months. I became the WebMama because the Web needed a nurturing soul to give it birth. (anyway, Webmistress didn't quite cut it).

Engineers in a high-tech company have a lot of opinions about the external Web site but they are not marketing people and marketing must control the impression the Web makes on potential customers.

I hired some hot shot "twenty-something" graphics designers for the icon development and a specialized Web consultant to select the search engine, choose and implement the Web server, and an authentication system. I learned HTML and developed the navigation system. Behind the scenes was the system administrator making sure we had a machine, a firewall (another story), and a connection to the Internet. Our VP of Marketing (new on the scene) stepped in to help with the graphics look & feel to increase the WOW factor for first time viewers.

Meanwhile, the rest of the organization were starting to use the internal Web as a means to communicate policies, project status, and system administration procedures. The employee phone list went on our internal Web. Support was completely bought in and purchased a call tracking and quality package that had a Web-based client (in beta phase of development, of course). Our product (an IP Switch) has a Web server built into it for configuration, installation, and network management using the customer's Web browser of choice.

### A Standing Ovation from the outside world.

The Web site went live 3 days before our coming out

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party at Network+Interop Las Vegas 96 (where the IP Switch ATM1600 was Grand Winner of the Best of Show Award). We received over 17000 hits the first day (a hit is a download so I tend to divide by 7 to get number of people). People complimented us on the ease of finding information and the originality of the grid style layout. My favorite compliment was from one of our VCs. He said "I show it to all my portfolio CEOs and tell them this is how it should be."

### **WebMama Retires**

Building a Web site requires a special set of skills. First, an understanding of organizational structure and marketing focus is required to provide the right materials for the visitors. Graphics must be oriented in order to achieve a unique and impressive first page, along with engineering skills in order to work on UNIX editors (ie write HTML - the Web coding language). Maintaining a Web site requires additional system administration skills and an empowerment of each of the organizations responsible (ie support, sales, engineering) to maintain and develop their specific areas of the Web. Finally, I handed off my WebMama job to a new hire right out of Stanford University in July. Marketing will continue to be responsible for look & feel and the event/news/literature sections.

### **Where Ipsilon is Today**

We shipped product on April 29th, 1996. The first IP Switch installation at a customer site was configured via a Web browser. The first software upgrade is only available as a download from the Ipsilon Web site. Shortly, the call tracking system for support will be up and running with a Web-based client for the internal support people. All HR documents and system administration hints and procedures are only available via the internal Web site.

From a marketing point of view the Web is a great success. Reports are that Ipsilon's home page makes it easy to find product information, is visually exciting, and is up to date. Not everyone thinks the Web is the primary vehicle for marketing communications. I recently mailed 12,000 invitations for our first set of sales seminars and was asked to include a mail back reply card. We received a few cards, which usually arrived late. Most West coast people registered over the Web and New Yorkers still made phone calls. However, success comes in strange forms. I had a sales rep ask why I wasn't posting the seminar attendee list on the internal Web site and did I really have to fax it to him?

Two months after the launch Ipsilon is averaging about 8000 hits a day. The Web has only gone down once! The challenge continues to be passing the vision to new employees. As the company grows to over 60 people new employees have not been preached the "Web-first" vision and insist on shipping product documentation on paper and hoping for printed phone lists.

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