

Hey! Where's My Jet Pack?

Written by Robert Jackson Jr.
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Remember TV in the late '50s and early '60s? Forward-thinking social scientists inundated us with tales of what our lives would be in the year 2000. According to these guys, by now we'd have colonies on the moon and sidewalks that moved, and we'd all use jet-propelled backpacks to go from point to point.

The next time we send a shuttle to the moon will be the 12th of Never. Unless you've just polished off a pint of Jack Daniels, the only place you'll see a moving sidewalk is at a major airport. And I'm still waiting for my jet pack.

As far as the Internet goes, many people are having a "Hey! Where's my jet pack?" moment.

Follow The Money

I recently ran across an interesting article from 1996. In it, industry analyst Jupiter Communications predicted that business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce would reach \$500 billion by 2000. It was actually \$336 billion. In a study released in October of this year, the same analyst predicted that B2B e-commerce would experience staggering growth and reach \$6.3 trillion dollars by 2005.

So much about the Internet has proved to be beyond accurate predictions, so I wouldn't bet the farm that we'll get to those numbers. But whether B2B e-commerce approaches \$6.3 trillion is not the real point here. The point is this: If revenues for last year were \$336 billion, how many small businesses are getting their cut? To find out, let's crunch some numbers.

An August survey by Dun & Bradstreet found that 60 percent of small businesses did not even have a Web site. All the hype and ink that has been devoted to trumpeting the advantages of B2B e-commerce for the past six years, and more than half of small businesses haven't even bothered to get into the game. Last year, *Small Business Computing* magazine conducted a reader survey that found only 35 percent of the small businesses that had a Web site actually felt their sites had a positive effect on their businesses. So of the 40 percent of small

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businesses that have an Internet site, 65 percent have an unsatisfactory Internet experience.

If B2B e-commerce reached \$336 billion, who's making all the money? The large companies who have the resources to devote to their Web sites have seen the biggest dividends from the Internet. Based on these numbers, the logical conclusion would be that if your business doesn't have a substantial Internet budget, the chances of success are slim to none.

How can a small-business owner find success on the Internet when faced with these less-than-encouraging numbers? Naturally, I have some answers.

Attack of the Crappy Sites

Many of the problems with a lot of small-business sites can be boiled down to two areas: appearance and strategy – or lack thereof. For now we'll focus on appearance.

In the past I've given presentations called "Attack of the Crappy Sites" and "Attack of the Crappy Sites: The Prequel," so I can't stress this enough: Your site doesn't have to be designed by someone who holds a Ph.D. in Internet graphic design, but it does have to look professional. There are thousands of sites out there that just look putrid. There's really no other way to put it. I recently went to the Web site of a respected local business. Everything about the physical business communicated professionalism and high standards. Everything about the Web site communicated amateurism and a total absence of standards. When I interviewed the owner, he mentioned that his site was designed by some people on his staff, and he was hesitant to pay someone to design his site when he had people on staff who could do it.

A local manufacturer repeated this same sentiment. Its site was designed by the owner's son, who asked the rhetorical question, "Why pay somebody to build a site when I can design it myself?"

This brings to mind two Internet truisms: Professional Internet designers can do a better job designing Web sites than 99.9 percent of the rest of us; and having the ability to go to Best Buy and plunk down \$149.95 to purchase PhotoShop does not make one a professional Internet designer.

The first impression many potential clients will have of your business will be made by your Internet site. In the vast majority of the cases, you shouldn't entrust your son, computer guy, mailman, personal trainer, or the guy who collects quarters on Centennial Bridge to design your site. In many cases, you can have a professionally designed site for under \$1,200. Get a list of professional designers from the local chamber. Compare prices. Look at their portfolios. Ask questions. Get bids. Allow them to earn your business. With a professionally designed site, you'll be in a much better position to get your share of the \$336 billion in B2B e-commerce.

Here's a bonus question for that potential designer. You know how designers like to put their logo and links at the bottom of your Web site? Ask them: "How does having your logo and a link from my site to your site help my business?" You're already paying them a fee to design your site. Unless they pay for ad placement, insist that they remove those links from your site.

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