**NEXT NEW ERA**

***NEXT NEW ERA; Now That They've Come, What Can We Sell Them?***

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**By**[**Bob Tedeschi**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/bob-tedeschi)

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BEFORE people realized they could make a million dollars on the Web by putting an ''e'' in front of any word in the dictionary, registering the new name and shaking down a venture capitalist for seed money, the Internet was a much more communal place.

Perhaps because it was populated largely by academics and technology geeks who either cared little about getting rich or considered the idea so outlandish as to be irrelevant, the Internet assumed a quaint identity as a place where people offered information freely.

Personal home pages, chat rooms, bulletin boards and Usenet groups, which are open-discussion forums on various topics, drew millions seeking advice, news or companionship. Those running the sites frequently relied on surplus computer space from universities or whatever network power they could scrape together with spare money.

Then, of course, came e-commerce, a phenomenon that prompted the tripartite categorization of the Internet: now, alongside commerce sites are content sites, in which a publisher provides news and information, and community sites, in which the users create the content.

But the tremendous interest in making money from the large number of people who frequent a site, or ''monetizing eyeballs'' (in industry parlance), also foretold profound changes for community sites.

Community sites began selling advertising to stay in business. The sites incorporated and wrote business plans. Some, like TheGlobe.com, went public. Others, like the Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com), were bought by bigger sites (Amazon.com in this case). Still others, like Deja News.com, a buying guide in which consumers rate products and give advice, assumed a new identity (Deja.com) and charged headlong into the e-commerce fray.

In some cases, the community sites angered their constituencies, who accused them of selling out to commercial interests. In others, the transitions were smooth. But whatever the story, analysts and executives of community sites say the e-commerce revolution changed the face of the Internet.

''Community sites have been wandering the desert in search of a revenue stream,'' said Lisa Allen, an e-commerce analyst with Forrester Research in Cambridge, Mass. ''Now they've latched on to e-commerce, which is the fair-haired child of the Internet. The only problem is, commerce isn't making any of them rich, either.''

Sometimes, commerce has alienated the users who helped create the sites' content. Tom Phillips, the chief executive of Deja .com, said that site angered ''a lot of people when we made the change.''

The change Mr. Phillips referred to took place last year. DejaNews.com, one of the few sites to provide easy access to and retrieval of Usenet topics and information, became Deja.com, a site devoted to users who wanted information about a range of products. DejaNews.com had generated a loyal following and had made money by selling advertising. But when Deja.com rolled out, it began posting boxes on the site's pages, requesting opinions and ratings on products.

Those opinions were aggregated into a vast (and anonymous) database, the linchpin of the new Deja.com site. But as Mr. Phillips said, ''we sort of force-fed people the ratings and reviews, and it slowed the site down,'' leaving it less navigable.

David Wilson, Deja's senior vice president, said, ''The complaints mostly talked about how Deja was, and is, the standard-bearer of Usenet, and they were concerned we'd take our eye off the Usenet ball and everyone would suffer for it.''

As a result, Mr. Phillips said, ''we lost a chunk of people, but we also gained some, so our traffic has been pretty flat.''

He added that Deja would drop the ratings boxes and that ''given the viral nature of Usenet,'' he expected those who left the site to return.

But Deja is not dropping its e-commerce ambitions.

Rather, the company's newest incarnation, released this month, expands its offerings of purchase information and includes direct links to merchants selling goods featured on the Deja site.

The transition from community to commerce was much less bumpy for the Internet Movie Database, a compendium of movie trivia built largely by contributions from movie buffs around the world who gathered on the IMDb.com site.

According to Col Needham, who founded the database in 1990 in Britain, the site received four complaints when it decided to start selling advertisements in 1996, and no complaints when it was bought by Amazon in 1998.

Not all the people who used the database were thrilled. Some felt that a friendly and comfortable online community had been swallowed by a giant.

Still, Mr. Needham said that not only did the alliance with Amazon lead to an increase in the number of contributors to the database; as it has grown, the database has hired some of the people who contributed voluntarily.

''I think that in the end, most people understand that when you have e-commerce in a content site, you can fund the future growth of the site, so users win both ways,'' he said. ''They can buy things they're interested in, and they have better content.''

Yahoo encountered trouble last year when it bought GeoCities, a site that allows users to create free home pages. Soon after the acquisition, Yahoo posted a notice on its GeoCities site (http://geocities.yahoo .com), suggesting that Yahoo could take the content from a person's GeoCities site and use it in a book, for example, without compensating the home-page publisher.

The event caused a stir among the GeoCities faithful, spawning a boycott and inquiries from at least one consumer group.

''I can understand where the users were coming from,'' said Doug Hirsch, a senior production director for Yahoo Communities.

''But at the end of the story, we did change our terms of service,'' he said, to assure home-page publishers that their content was, in fact, their property.

''Consumers are very wary of what commerce sites are doing with content they provide -- and they should be,'' Mr. Hirsch said. He argued, however, that GeoCities had become less commercial since Yahoo bought it, notably containing less intrusive advertising. ''I'm actually proud that it hasn't lost its grass-roots vibe,'' he said.

OTHER community sites are heading into e-commerce, hoping to make a similar claim in the future. Gamers .com, a site devoted to video game enthusiasts, is one such venture. Among other things, it lets users rate video games and post notes on message boards about anything related to games.

According to the site's chief executive, Dennis Fong -- known in professional computer game circles as Thresh, the undefeated world champion -- the company will soon introduce a service that allows users to buy games on the site from retailers or buy from other users in an auction format. In addition, he said, they will be able to trade games.

Mr. Fong said he expected no resistance from users because the site was committed to the open exchange of information about every game on it. ''We're the Switzerland of the games industry,'' he said.

Nonetheless, he added, the transition should be done carefully, lest it wave the e-commerce flag too proudly in the process. ''The last thing we want to be known as is a store,'' he said. ''It's very hard for a store to be cool.''

ON THE WEB

Bob Tedeschi writes the E-Commerce Report each Monday. A full archive of his columns can be found on The New York Times on the Web: www.nytimes.com/cyber

Mr. Tedeschi will respond to readers' questions and comments submitted to a special online forum at

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