Chapter XI
A Look at the Future

INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves to raise an awareness of some of the more cutting edge Internet innovations and applications that may become viable and useful to the small business operator in future. The chapter focuses on some of the new and emerging forms of technologies that the authors have identified as potentially affecting the Web presence. Consequently, the topic areas and content examined in the chapter does not claim to be all encompassing or prescriptive. Some of the innovations examined are nascent and may not progress to a critical mass for general adoption, whilst others tend to be used by larger business entities, possibly requiring a re-configuration if they are to be successfully used in the small business environment. Arguably, many if not all would in some way impact on the business Web presence if they were to be adopted in future.

An examination of the adoption and use of new forms of technology and ideas - or innovations as they are sometimes referred - can be assisted by examining how the early adopters use these innovations. This was briefly discussed in Chapter IV. The concept of innovation adoption and the importance of early adopters is well documented by Rogers (1995). The Rogers’ paradigm describes how innovations advance, or diffuse, through a population either to be adopted or to be rejected. The successful diffusion of an innovation generally follows the S-shaped rate of adoption when a cumulative curve is plotted. The cumulative S-shaped rate of adoption curve is depicted in Figure 1 showing the relationship between the adopters and late-adopters over a period of time. Generally, the adoption of the innovation by the early adopters results in an adoption curve that is reasonably flat. However, as more members of a business group adopt the innovation, the curve ‘takes off’,
with the advent of late adopters signalling the innovation has diffused through that particular group.

Clearly, for the small business operator an indicator of an innovation that may be associated with a Web presence can be closely allied in the identification of the early adopters. The early adopters are important in the diffusion process as opinion leaders - where potential adopters look to them for advice and information, as well as best practices to emulate. Moreover, the early adopters are considered to be the individuals to investigate or analyse before using a new idea, tending to serve as role models for many others. Early adopters can be deemed to be the most important constituent in the innovation-diffusion process because they decrease uncertainty about a new idea or technology, and as a consequence convey a message of acceptance and effectiveness to peers (Rogers 1995). According to Norman (1998), the early users of an innovation provide the experience for the late adopters to observe and to learn from. Norman further suggests that even though these early users are relatively few in number, they are the drivers of a technology and can provide examples of how and why that innovation can be used. Arguably, the small business operator by conducting an examination within their own industry for the specific use of new forms of Web-related technology will identify a set of industry early adopters from which they themselves can learn from.

Small businesses have been known to be conservative in nature in relation to their use of ICTs, so many feel quite comfortable with the notion of waiting until the early adopters have been successful or otherwise. Of course, if the adoption has been successful they do not necessarily achieve the same level of benefits (often resulting in competitive advantage) that early adopters realise, but at the same time they are not taking the same risk with an unknown technology. Often, the late adopter is forced to adopt the technology as it has diffused through the majority of the industry as is regarded as a requirement by business partners or customers.
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