Chapter V

Portals –
Gateways for Marketing

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Abstract

Marketers need to understand the role portals play in the search behaviour of consumers for various products and services over the Internet. Portals, which simply mean gateways to the Internet, are slowly reaching a mature phase of the product life cycle. Many claim that their roles are changing to become more or less like very large “aggregators” for the marketing of products and services. There needs to be a good understanding of the importance and value portals can bring to the marketing function in terms of advancing the concept of relationship marketing, and also understanding key consumer behaviour habits at Web sites, in order to design real “user-friendly” portal models for marketing.

Introduction

Marketers and advertisers are yet to understand the potential of the Internet. Action is being taken with online portal companies such as Yahoo!, who have
recently launched an online marketing solutions resource centre to educate them. According to some pundits, the age of the portal, which simply means a gateway to the Internet for consumers to access information and purchase various products and services, is slowly reaching a mature phase. Some predict that portal companies like America Online, Yahoo! and RealEstate.com are in the process of transforming themselves from portals to aggregators, bringing millions of customers cheap Visa cards, lower long-distance rates, and less-costly insurance products. The marketing function that now uses the Internet to a greater extent needs to be aware of the potential of portal sites and the importance and impact they can have in introducing customers to search and shop for products in an online environment.

The aim of this chapter is fourfold:

- It first defines the concept of a portal; then the past, current, and future states of e-commerce and portals are discussed.
- Next, discussion focuses on portals and their relationship with the marketing function.
- This is followed by theoretical models of portals.
- Finally discussion centres around the behaviour of consumers at portals and other Web sites.

### Portals—A Sneak Preview

The word portal is often used for Web sites that function as an entry to a repository of information on almost any topic on the Internet. Some of the more popular portals that Web surfers are familiar with are sites like America Online (AOL) and CompuServe, along with directories and search engines like Yahoo and Alta Vista. During the past few years, numerous research articles have been published that aim at defining what exactly constitutes the term portal. These definitions are based on varied viewpoints; however, one binding thread among all is the agreement that a portal is a “gateway to the World Wide Web.”

A portal is defined as an entrance point to online content. The portal concept has evolved across a number of markets and applications. Customer portals focus on individual customers and offer one-stop Internet access. By providing
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