

On-Line Registration Forms make good e-Business sense!

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A client recently asked for advice in setting up an on-line registration form.

The Scenario: He has an existing, in-house, custom database and wanted to know what would be involved in creating an on-line registration form that would update his in-house database. And, more importantly, if it made sense to do so. (My answer was very specific to him, however it can apply to other situations as well.)

Question: What options are available to be used to create on-line registration forms?

Answer: Typically, on-line forms are set up using a Common Gateway Interface (CGI) script, which, acts as a data transporter to your e-mail program. When the visitor fills in the information and clicks "submit," their information gets e-mailed to you. The form looks like a database because it has fields that are filled in, but it's not. It is just an e-mail transporter form.

This setup works well for many applications and meets many needs, but the onus is on you to make sure the customer gets what he or she needs in a timely manner. If a connection with your internal systems doesn't exist, then re-typing the information may be necessary. You, or a staff member, will have to carry out the work required and this costs both time and money.

You may in fact already have another kind of on-line form (a "search form" for example), on your Web site, which is more interactive. This type of form is connected to a database, which, resides on your Web server. The control is in the hands of the visitor when he or she keys in a request. The benefit of this form is that it is self-serving. Interaction from you or your staff isn't required to ensure that your customers' needs are met. It has the potential to save you time and money.

However, there can be a drawback to this system if you have more than one database. If you have a database at your office and a replica of the office database on your Web server, then you need to be sure that updates between these are done regularly. This process could cost

more money in the long run unless a long-term solution can be implemented.

A good long-term strategy would be to develop an on-line "registration form" that will capture the required information and automatically synchronize it with your in-house database on a regular basis, perhaps once per day. This idea requires more programming and development time up front. In the long run, however, it will save you considerable time.

Remember, time is money and that old saying "A penny saved is a penny earned" still makes good e-business sense, today.

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