

BASIS: YOUR PORTAL TO E-BUSINESS

by Peggy Lewis and Greg Smith

Over the course of the last few months, BASIS has been working on an e-Commerce solution. Here, our Chief Operations Officer, Peggy Lewis, and our Webmaster, Greg Smith, tell the story of planning and developing our own e-Commerce application, which will be rolled out in phases to test groups beginning in July.

As with any business decision, there needs to be a reason to do something. We started with the question, "Should BASIS do e-Commerce?" Then, "Why?" Then, "What if we don't?" The answers at which we arrived pretty much spelled out that our industry and our Customers demand a BASIS e-Commerce solution and without one, we would be left behind.

Actually, we have been doing e-Commerce—conducting business with our Customers electronically—for a while. We take orders, answer tech support questions and deliver new licenses all by e-mail, and we make our software available for direct download. These initial steps constitute the beginnings of e-Commerce.

We found, however, that the development process of an e-Commerce solution takes a big leap once you include the aspect of financial transactions. The good news is that our own e-Commerce development cycle is typical. The bad news is that the planning is just not that simple, "simple" being the operative word in every other e-Commerce decision we've made.

THE BENEFITS TRIUMPH

E-Commerce simplifies doing business, but making e-Commerce simple is complex. That's because e-Commerce is not about tweaking the same old business processes and putting a nice GUI interface on them. Every process has been taken apart, redefined and re-implemented from the Customer's point of view. E-Commerce is not about what the company does, it's about what the Customers want.

The benefits are there, though, for both our Customers and us. The goal is to move as much of the grunt work of transactions through electronic channels as possible. That grunt work includes things like inventory lookups, order entry, pricing calculations, order fulfillment, invoicing, tracking shipments and account inquiries. The advantages to both parties are efficiency, convenience and 24/7 availability. As a BASIS Customer, you can come to our site, purchase additional users for a license, purchase a new license, request media, search the Online Knowledge Base for answers to your technical questions, register for TechCon2000 and check the availability of a particular revision level for an operating system.

E-Commerce, for all its efficiencies, does not eliminate sales or customer service departments. It does not eliminate personal relationships or the need to talk to a live human being. It does mean we will be able to do more with less, because e-Commerce will be an extension of, not a replacement for, our current business methods. Its efficiencies should enable us to broaden our market reach. We genuinely believe Web-based commerce is the future, but it will never replace the human touch. A successful company has to have both.

USING OUR OWN PRODUCTS

We made the business decision to put our money where our mouth is and build the application with our own products. We wanted to showcase the potential of BBj®. There were other compelling reasons, too. Because we use a BBx®-based accounting system, using BBj was the most logical solution for providing a Web-based application and integrating it with our internal MIS systems. We also felt that BASIS products are unique enough in their bundling and possible configurations that an off-the-shelf solution wouldn't meet our Customers' needs.



Our platform decision was easy. With BBj's platform independence, adding a BBj application, like our e-Commerce application, to any system was not an issue. Our Web site runs on a Linux operating system with Stronghold, an Apache Web-server derivative with a high level of security. We could integrate our e-Commerce application with the existing processes we had on our Web site, which protected our investment in our Web server installation.

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

Putting together an effective e-Commerce solution required the participation of all departments in our company: Sales and Marketing, Operations, Accounting and Engineering.

Our Sales and Marketing Department determined what processes needed to be implemented into the site. By documenting the flow of a sales transaction, we began designing how the transactions should be handled on the Web. We made the decision to first create a basic system that would handle about 90% of the transaction types encountered by our sales staff. Determining what products to offer for sale on the Web site and how to sell

them was also part of the sales and marketing input. Providing production selection ability for Customers to determine just the right solution for their particular businesses was a challenge.

Our Customer Service group of Operations pointed out that we had no standard set of business rules for the sales process. We had to identify rules and agree on them before we could codify them into the Web site. All Customer Service processes were examined. Some were easy to implement and would be often used, such as serial number lookup. But for the 10% of processes that were more unique and uncommon, we deferred Web implementation.

Once we had completed review and analysis of what we felt were basic processes, we then had to examine the data structures of our MIS system. We found that we needed to add items to support the basic e-Commerce functions we wanted, and our MIS staff had to make additions and modifications to our accounting system.

Our Accounting Department also had to be able to deal with accepting instant credit card payments over the Web. While we have been processing credit cards for payment all along, the Web-based process is different in that the transaction information is kept online in our secure credit card processor's system.

The Shipping group of Operations had to make sure that we had the correct shipping cost information built into the e-Commerce area of our MIS system. Because we have special shipping rates with our carriers, we had to make sure that we could provide the correct rates to those Customers requesting media before they completed their e-Commerce transaction.

And our Engineering Department wrote the actual e-Commerce application. It was important to us that we use our own products, and we knew we wanted to use BBj as the technology.

THE DEVELOPMENT STEPS

We first wrote the application using Visual PRO/5®. We will use that code base to go to BBj. Because we were able to analyze BBj in the context of our own e-Commerce project and add features we needed, those of our Customers who are looking to BBj for their own e-Commerce solutions will greatly benefit.

The initial steps included:

1. Defining the requirements.

In defining our e-Commerce solution, we used a very standard systems development approach. First, we defined our requirements. This took a lot of time, as we had to identify everything we needed to support our Customers and our department processes.

2. Designing the user interface.

The next step was designing the user interface. We knew we wanted an interface that was familiar, consistent and straightforward. Coming up with one that met these goals took some doing, but we believe we found one.

3. Defining basic functionality.

As we examined our features list, we realized that we needed to simplify our design or it would be months and months before we had a working system for Customers to use. We divided the project into two phases. The first phase became to provide simply the basic

functionality of being able to purchase products from our Web site. Development of bells and whistles became the second phase.

BASIS' E-COMMERCE FUTURE

As our site evolves, we will enable Customers to configure systems and save those configurations to be recalled for future purchases or modeling. We will allow Customers to check accounts receivable balances and reprint historical orders and invoices. Customers will be able to do extensive searching in the serial number database and assign end-user names and accounts for tracking purposes. In essence, our database can become your database. If you purchase our Software Asset Management Plan, we will be able to automatically deliver updates to you or your end user, per your instructions. You'll be able to link directly to all related information about a pending purchase.

We're excited about the possibilities of what we can incorporate into our e-Commerce solution. The possibilities are unlimited. We have started with the basics but will continually add to the site's functionality, making it easier and easier for our Customers to run their businesses on BASIS.