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E-BUSINESS

More Than Just Having a Website

Most of us are quite familiar with how many traditional bricks-and-mortar companies today are rushing aggressively to the Internet with transactional websites to enter the world of e-commerce. However, the water treatment industry has not moved as quickly as other industries. Unlike a computer, book, CD or even a car—water treatment systems usually need to be designed and sold based on a particular set of conditions such as feed water quality and final water quality required. With so many water treatment technologies and ways to apply them, a major challenge to our industry is to develop online configurators that allow the user to select and order a system that best fits his specific needs.

In the short-term, perhaps the best opportunity to optimize the e-commerce channel in the water treatment industry is in the business-to-business (B2B) sector. The assumption is that dealers are trained to select the proper equipment for standard applications. The website gives them a convenient tool not only for placing an order, but also in providing the information necessary for quoting current pricing, detailed specification, standard lead times, etc.

A transactional website (e-commerce) is a very powerful selling tool, as it is available to receive orders 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, the same could be said about a fax machine. So, to truly maximize the return on your clicks-and-mortar investment, your whole business process should be as efficient as your new e-commerce capability. The customer should be given access to critical back office information such as real-time reporting of order status, availability and payment history—enterprise commerce. Looking at these other behind-the-scenes components of e-business may offer the best opportunity for increased productivity and customer satisfaction.

The term e-business covers the entire spectrum of business processes that use electronic tools. This includes

- E-commerce (receiving orders electronically),
- E-procurement (purchasing raw materials electronically),

- Internal processing (getting things to happen without human intervention),
- Inventory control (bar code tracking), and
- Several other reporting and communicating functions that lend themselves well to the onslaught of new technology.

The goal is to create as much of a "frictionless" environment as possible. It usually is best to limit the scope initially and then use that model to quickly expand the frictionless process to other areas. Your goal should not be 100 percent frictionless everywhere, rather focus on the big opportunities that will eliminate pain points for you and/or your customers.

In many cases, achieving a frictionless process may be easier than you think. For example, setting up a relatively simple Intranet will allow you to create targeted "live" reports that can be viewed by all internal and external employees.

This technique can be used, for example, to help achieve a 24-hour shipment commitment for small configured-to-order RO systems. A search of the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)* system for open orders can be run at five minute intervals, and the results can be displayed on a company's Intranet. A dedicated monitor displaying the current status



(new, assembly, finished, shipping, credit hold, late) of each order is placed in the QS manufacturing cell giving the assemblers the ability to directly manage their workload. This five-minute frictionless process (from order entry to manufacturing), which is enabled by the Intranet and other manufacturing and inventory improvements, eliminates a paper intensive order processing procedure that includes five queue points, 1,000 feet of travel, three hours of work and an elapsed time of one to two weeks.

While companies such as McDonalds have used this sort of internal communication technique for years, what makes this Intranet approach different is that anyone in the world with access to the Internet can view this information through a secure portal. This means that the salesperson on the other side

of the world, as well as the inside customer service personnel, can quickly confirm the up-to-minute status of an order to a customer.

The obvious next step is to make this sort of information available to customers via a website. This would require a complete integration of the ERP system with website (enterprise commerce), which is a much bigger task.

The point is to do what you can to improve your business today while working towards your long-term goals. The technology of the new economy offers much more than just websites to the water treatment industry, it gives us a great opportunity to drive improvement through our entire business process.

About the Author
Dale Langefels is the director of e-business and marketing for Crane Environmental, a Crane Co. company. He has a B.S. degree in Aerospace Engineering and Mechanics in addition to more than 12 years of experience in sales management and marketing of water treatment equipment to the commercial and industrial sector.

For the past two years, he has focused on developing an e-commerce selling channel ("Quick Ship" program) and driving total business improvements at Crane using e-business tools.

For more information on this subject, write in 1011 on the reader service card.

* An ERP system is the collection of software programs which ties together all of an enterprise's various functions—HR, finance, manufacturing, sales, etc. This software also provides for the analysis of this data to plan production, forecast sales, analyze quality and so on. Other popular packages include Macola, Oracle, SAP, ASP and JD Edwards.

Leveraging e-Business

