

## **What a difference a decade makes... on the Internet**

The Internet has made a significant impact on our personal and professional lives over the past 10 years.

Let's start with a snapshot of how SMEs (Small Medium Enterprises) used the Internet 10 years ago. There was approximate 3 million websites worldwide in 1998, a fraction of today's number. If you were a SME with a website in 1998, you were certainly ahead of the curve, however, your site was likely a digital brochure at best and most likely contained the infamous words, 'under construction', somewhere on the site. Many small businesses were not yet using email in 1998 and although email actually predates the Internet, it was the introduction of the Internet that email began to gain wide spread adoption. The Internet has come a long way from the days of 'brochure sites' and the initial uses for email. Here is a general overview of SOME of the changes since 1998.

### **Websites**

Your website should have goals, such as lead or revenue generation. Once you clearly define what the goals of your website are, you can evaluate the performance of your site and eventually calculate a Return On Investment (ROI). In 1998 the investment required to get anything other than a 'brochure site' off the ground was likely the #1 barrier to development. In today's market you can have a site built for 1/10 the price. In 2008, your clients and prospects are doing their research online and likely making some purchasing decisions based on the quality of your website, not just that you have one.

### **Email**

While email has become a key method of communication, it's not without some challenges. Roughly 85% of the email traffic across the Internet is SPAM. Service providers are doing a better job of 'reducing the noise', however, the tighter your SPAM filter, the more likely an email you want to receive, doesn't get through. The email that reaches your inbox can be a very effective way for SMEs to communicate with customers, co-workers and suppliers. With the steady increase in legitimate email traffic, it is important to have a disciplined approach to monitoring, sorting and responding to emails so nothing gets missed.

### **High Speed Internet**

In 1998 the majority of SME's were accessing the Internet with a dial-up connection. High Speed Internet access continues to drop in price while increasing in speed. The more access to high speed we have the more we jam through the connection. The more applications and services (i.e. VoIP, email, VPNs) we run across the connection, the more reliant we are on the access. As applications and services that rely on high speed are added to your network, it's important to plan accordingly to increase your speed.

### **Wireless Internet**

Similar to 'wired' high speed, the performance of wireless Internet access is increasing, which in turn increases wireless usage. In 1998, wireless devices were generally limited to cell phones that were not connected to the Internet. Today, if you have not sent an email from your mobile device or a laptop in a wireless café, there is a good chance you have received one. The impact on today's SME is mobility, allowing you to do more while on the road.

### **Internet Security**

Another side-effect of increased Internet usage is the vulnerability to Internet security issues. The existence of Internet security threats has spawned a whole new industry focused strictly on

preventing and limiting business Internet security risk. In 1998, security threats and exploits were mainly focused on larger businesses and popular targets (i.e. Microsoft and CNN). Today SMEs have to be aware of and monitor their exposure to Internet security threats because we are all targets.

### **Internet Marketing**

Enewsletters, search engine marketing, web press releases, blogs, etc., are all inexpensive ways for the SME to market and they weren't readily available in 1998. Google is the leader in this space and offers many tools to allow the SME to get its message out; as a minimum you should have a Google account and register your website with them.

### **Business Applications**

With the proliferation of the Internet also came the concept of Software as a Service (SaaS). In 1998, SaaS was in its infancy. Today we have companies such as Salesforce.com and NetSuite that were founded on the basic principles of SaaS and are delivering enterprise level applications to the SME market. As adoption of the SaaS model increases the SMEs access to applications such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) will increase as well, providing SMEs with the ability to better manage and operate their businesses while improving communications.

### **Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP)**

VoIP didn't exist in 1998 on a consumer level, but your phone company was likely making plans to use this technology and it is one of the major factors in the steady reduction in long distance charges. Basically, VoIP is the ability to have a voice conversation over a data (Internet) connection. The increase in available high speed Internet access has been a significant factor in allowing VoIP to filter down to the consumer and SME market. Today the benefits of a properly deployed and managed VoIP system are much greater than cheap long distance.

In summary, today's SME Internet usage likely consists of: regular use of websites, increased email traffic, high speed connectivity at the office, wireless devices, and some level of Internet security. There are more than 110 million websites on the Internet today. Unfortunately roughly 50% of SMEs still do not have a website and many of those that do are not taking advantage of the affordable technologies available to them. If you are not currently using, you are likely considering the pros and cons of Internet Marketing, Internet Based Business Applications and VoIP. The Internet has provided the SME with advantages previously available only to larger enterprises.

What's next for the Internet? All indicators point towards continued commoditization - increasing speed, with increased access, allowing for better services at a lower cost to the SME. The Internet has certainly revolutionized the way SMEs do business and will continue to evolve over the next 10 years, likely to a point where we will not recognize the Internet as we knew it 1998 or know it even today.

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