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Combine Internet, local business and a Web site. Mix well. Then reap

## WORLD WIDE \$ALES

# Billings firms plug into Internet potential

Story by Dennis Gaub  
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Reliable Tent & Awning went on the Internet last year in hopes of gaining tepee sales in the United States. It found a niche in the global market.

The Billings company relied on an employee's then-19-year-old son to design its World Wide Web site, which was launched in February 1996.

It cost about \$4,000 to create and publish an online catalog listing the company's selection of tents, tepees, awnings, fabrics, stoves, saddle bags and other equipment.

That "seemed like a lot at the time," recalled Connie Kellogg, Reliable's marketing manager and mother of the Web-site builder. Still, the company believed that the experience to be gained justified the expense. Those who championed Reliable's Internet debut turned out to be right. Reliable has sold tepees customers in Switzerland, Japan and New Zealand. It also has a pending sale of tepees to an entrepreneur in the Spanish Canary Islands.

This person is developing a Sioux Indian theme park, Kellogg said.

"Those (sales) were directly related to the Internet. That's money we wouldn't have seen if we hadn't been on the Internet," she said. "We've more than got our money back."

Kellogg said Reliable's primary goal was to gain exposure around the United States and expand the customer base beyond its core group of hunters.

"We wanted to get our tepees going, and we know that more than Indians want tepees. We thought the Net would help with that," she said.

Reliable's cyberspace education is representative of what other Billings businesses are learning: Web sites are no longer a novelty, but are becoming vital to companies seeking access to national and international markets.

Customers within those markets once appeared unreachable or were too costly to target. And local businesses are setting — and achieving — goals other than revenue growth. It is more difficult to measure achievement of non-bottom-line goals, but they include important benchmarks of business success such as better communication and relationship-building with customers.

The Internet is also being touted for its business-to-business potential; it makes possible efficient networking among businesses, often far removed geographically, that are potential partners.

Here are examples of some area businesses that have chalked up Web success stories, compiled with the help of local Internet service providers:

### CTA Architects Engineers

CTA's Internet venture began about two years ago when the firm established an e-mail "gateway," said Jerry Nettik, who came from ComputerLand to become CTA's system engineer.

Six months later, the company published its first Web page, hosted by a local Internet service provider, or ISP.

About a year ago, CTA moved to the next level of Internet use. It connected its own Web server - the computer that delivers information to people browsing the Web - to the Internet via a dedicated data line running at 56 kilobytes per second. The cost: \$350 per month, a fee shared by US West and CTA's ISP.

Nettik said CTA probably has greater Internet capability than the typical Billings business because of the networking experience that he and colleague Doug Parks possess.

"We looked at it as having full control over the system," Nettik said.

Using the Windows NT operating system, CTA has been able to integrate the Internet site viewed by the public with its in-house intranet, where information flows among employees and selected suppliers.

Everyone at CTA with a desktop computer has the Netscape browser loaded on the machine, Nettik said.

Rather than using telephone lines to make their Internet connection, employees have a continuous connection through the company's local area network, or LAN. To start a Web session, CTA employees need only to double-click the mouse at their computers. CTA's intranet gives the company a low-cost way of sharing information among its

offices in Boise, Idaho; Missoula; Great Falls; and the Billings headquarters. That has cut costs by setting up communication between clients and associates, any of whom might be on the road, Nettik said.

Most useful to CTA is its partnering program, which allows drawings to be transferred through the firm's FTP (file-transfer protocol) server, which can only be accessed by designated clients. Recently, Nettik said, CTA shared files with someone in Tennessee in minutes, a considerable savings in time compared with printing the documents and sending them via overnight delivery.

"It expands our network to not just being a LAN but a global net," Nettik said, mentioning CTA online partners in California, Oregon and Denver.

Meanwhile, CTA's Web site has initiated contact with suppliers as far off as a stone quarry in Italy, which e-mailed information about itself to CTA.

It's difficult to quantify the cost savings CTA, Nettik said. Instead, "the biggest benefit is our ability to meet deadlines," allowing CTA architects to work "down to the wire" before sending drawings to out-of-state consultants.

### **Ranch Realty Online**

Rocky Mountain Ranch Realty, which went online two years ago, is averaging about two e-mail leads per week, said Mike Schmechel, a Rocky Mountain agent. Commissions from the two sales the agency has made over the Internet have easily covered the cost of having the site designed by a local ISP.

"Our main intent in going online to help sell farms and ranches," Schmechel said. "A secondary goal was to use the Internet as a marketing tool to obtain listings. Showing prospective sellers a professional home page has been a fairly effective listing tool."

Schmechel said the biggest challenge has been keeping the agency's home page current by updating it with new listings and removing sold properties. Other important tasks are weeding out the "junk e-mail solicitations" that come to the agency — a common gripe of Internet users these days — and entering the right key words in Web search engines so people can find the page, he said.

The page seems to attract more small-tract buyers than large-ranch buyers. "This indicates, to us that there are not a lot of millionaires sitting at home searching the Net," Schmechel said.

He said the most interesting Internet inquiry that Rocky Mountain received came from a former citizen of the now-defunct Soviet Union, who "understood very little English and even less about financing. "The man bought a tract on a contract for deed but couldn't understand why his payments over a 10-year term totaled more than the purchase price. Eventually, the buyer was persuaded to talk to a banker in Spokane to get an explanation of loan interest - something that was impossible to do over the phone.

### **Big Sky Brides**

Local party producer Kelly Martin is putting together what he calls a "virtual bridal planner."

He has brought together more than 40 wedding-related businesses, ranging from accommodations to videography, at his Web site.

He expects to assemble more than 100 business under the Big Sky Brides mantle in a couple of months as he, takes aim at becoming "the wedding resource for weddings in the state."

Martin, 'a self-described "computer nut," said panicked brides had been calling his main business, Prince Party Productions, thinking it offered wedding planning.

"The light (for a comprehensive wedding planning service) has been on for two years. It was just a matter of getting the light online," he said.

Martin said he never intended his site to be a money-maker, although "I knew it would pay for itself. It isn't going to make me wealthy. It's fun; it gets people involved in the wedding business."

Through his Prince Party Web site, launched before Big Sky Brides, Martin has booked entertainment for weddings and Christmas parties. Now, he plans to give marriage-bound couples an even wider range of options through Big Sky Brides' links to other businesses that provide wedding-related services.

Martin used the illustrative example of a bride-to-be in Seattle, who was raised in Billings, will be wed in her home town and needs to plan the event from 800 miles away, as someone who will find the site especially useful.

"The thing is growing like weeds," he said. "Everybody I approach has already heard about it."

By early fall, Martin plans to have listings from vendors in Helena, Butte, Great Falls, Bozeman, Missoula and Miles City to give his site true statewide reach.

### **Old Montana Virtual West**

Erin Tamberella and Cathy Starita moved to Montana from New Orleans two years ago and saw a vacuum.

"We were astounded at the number of talented artists and crafters around the area that couldn't seem to take a living, not because of a lack of talent but because of the lack of a large enough market to support their work," Tamberella said.

"Montana has a certain mystique to it, and the Internet offered global potential. So we set out to merge the best of both - and Old Montana Virtual West was born," she said.

With sales as a primary goal, the partners realized that turning a start-up home-based business into a success required getting people to make repeat visits to their site.

"The statistics show that something like only 15 percent of the people on the Web ever visit a site more than once, and we knew that wouldn't work, so we tried to give them a reason to come back," Tamberella said.

She and Starita decided to create a Western town in cyberspace. Old Montana visitors can make their own Wanted posters, send electronic Montana cards and even join a virtual community in electing the town sheriff.

"And, of course, shop, shop, shop," Tamberella said. Her and Starita's goals have been unchanged since the site was launched: to provide a place for local craftsmen and artists to market their work to the world at a reasonable cost and to help everyone generate sales. Tamberella said the site is averaging about 1,000 page impressions per day and has won one of the major best-of-the-Web awards, which has helped increase traffic and sales.

"Every day, it gets a little better. As far as expectations go, I guess we've learned to be a little more patient and realize it's going to continue to build slowly. So, we no longer expect overnight success, but we still expect continued success," she said.