

E-Portals in Dubai and the United Arab Emirates

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INTRODUCTION

Technology is seen as a key driving force in the economy within all of the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE) nation; the seven are Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Qaiwain, Ras al-Khaimah, and Fujairah. The government of Dubai leads the other emirates in terms of commerce activity, and has taken a strategic view of creating and promoting government portals to achieve this vision. Recently Dubai's Municipality portal won an award for best content among all other UAE portals.

A portal is defined as an entrance point to online content. The portal concept has evolved across a number of markets and applications. Customer portals focus on individual customers and offer a one-stop Internet access. By providing a number of services such as searches, shopping, e-mail, and games, portals allow individuals to avoid browsing the Web but to in-fact rely and stay at one Web site like a one-stop shop.

This article investigates the growth and the strategic vision of the Dubai and UAE government in terms of creating and encouraging portals as a corner stone for the e-commerce in Dubai and the UAE.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE GULF ARAB WORLD

The Gulf sub-region, which includes all nations that belong to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), dominates personal computer (PC) ownership in comparison to other nations in the Arab world. Research suggests that the relatively high penetration of PCs in GCC countries could be because they are seen as luxury goods. On an average, around 8% of the population of the six GCC nations that include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the Sultanate of Oman own a PC. This compares with an average of 1.3% of the remaining Arab countries (Aladwani, 2003).

In terms of the number of Internet users, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) leads with 735,000 users, Djibouti comes last with 1,400 users. The UAE has around 13.2 hosts per 1,000 people making it the closest to the world average. Various studies have indicated that mobile phones

and Internet use in the Arab world is expected to double and possibly triple in the next three years. According to a study by Madar, a Dubai Media City based research company, the number of mobile phone subscribers in the Arab world will grow from 44 million to about 110 million by 2008. The same study indicated that the number of Internet users in the Arab world is set to increase to 52 million from 17 million (Ahmad, 2005).

According to Aladwani (2003), UAE is seen as the only Arab country that had the potential to be among the leaders of the world in Internet preparedness. This was mainly due to its latest technological initiatives, which is taking place in the UAE in general and Dubai in particular, the emirate is host to the first Arab Internet city and the first e-government. Aladwani (2003) points out that this was due to three main factors namely: leadership with a clear modern vision, sufficient financial resources, and Dubai is an attractive place to reside and work for highly skilled expatriates from South Asia, Western Europe, and the USA.

DUBAI'S E-PORTALS

Dubai Municipality

One of Dubai's main e-portal is its municipality portal, titled "Dubai Municipality's Portal" (www.dm.gov.ae). In 2005, this portal won an award for e-content as part of the e-government category of portals. This automatically places it in a pre-selection contest for e-products, nominated to represent the UAE in the World Summit Award (WSA). The criteria for winning the UAE contest for e-content included factors such as good quality, comprehensiveness of the content, ease of use, degree of value addition to users, attractiveness in design, and the degree of strategic importance for the global development of today's information society.

The portal offers around 190 transactional and 170 informational services. Its main objectives are to meet the changing needs of customers and to integrate state-of-the-art technology in communication and exchange of information. Dubai Municipality constantly improves the portal by updating the Web site, and coordinates with external entities to enable the portal to be linked with other Web sites that provide information about Dubai. The portal adds meta

tag key words for search engines and facilitates multiple banner display.

Axis Holidays: mytravelchannel.com

Although the Middle East travel industry is well developed, travel portals are only now beginning to grow and become popular with consumers. In a strategic move recently, Axis Holidays, the wholesale leisure travel division of DNATA, (part of the Emirates Group) acquired mytravelchannel.com. This portal's main objectives are to allow travel agents in the UAE and in other GCC nations to search and book worldwide travel products (Shoush, 2005).

Mr. Leo Fewtrell, Manager, DNATA Holidays and Events, sees an imminent need to keep the portal FRESH, and offer customers a range of travel product options. According to him, the key functions of mytravelchannel.com center around greater choice, serve as a neutral travel portal among the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and bring more partners like hotels and airlines together. Key tourism partners such as Emirates airlines, KLM, Jumeirah International, and Royal Caribbean have already begun to collaborate using the portal (Shoush, 2005).

Dubai Trade Point (DTP): Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI)

The Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) has recently launched a new portal called Dubai Trade Point (DTP)(www.dubaitradepoint.org). This portal's target market is the business community in the UAE, especially small- to medium-sized businesses. Accordingly, DTP is an electronic business portal with the aim to facilitate international trade through e-commerce and to help all its subscribers to access world markets through this e-commerce system. It provides subscribers an access to utilize Global Trade Point Net, a site containing numerous business opportunities (Deen, 2006).

According to Mr. Abdul Rahman Al Mutaiwee, Director General of DCCI, the DTP portal is designed for DCCI members with an aim to support the emirate's economic activities by helping to market members' products and services locally and globally. He sees immense opportunities

for Dubai businesses to trade and invest in international trade markets by using the portal. DTP also serves as a source for statistical information, access to databases, and provides investment information for its members. Since its inception, it has become a member of the World Trade Point Federation, which consists of 140 trade points from over 90 countries (Deen, 2006).

Tejari

One of the foremost business-to-business (B2B) portals is the Dubai based e-business portal--Tejari, which has been operational since June 2000. The mission of Tejari (www.tejari.com) is to maximize the business potential of customers in the Middle East region and to provide them with innovative online B2B reach thus, enhancing their competitiveness.

Since its inception, many Dubai- and Middle East-based businesses have been actively pursuing mutual and strategic relationships with Tejari. Most recently, the Dubai Tea Trading Centre (DTTC) and Tejari have entered into an agreement to develop an online tea trading platform. The aim of this alliance is for DTTC to extend its market reach and make Dubai a regional tea-trading hub (Staff Reporter, 2006).

Mr. Omar Hijazi, CEO, Tejari, envisions that the creation of the tea trade portal will significantly increase the value and volume of tea traded in and through Dubai. This joint-venture portal will allow tea related organizations to showcase their products and services, create trade leads to buy and sell, and also identify new partners in different countries. The head of DTTC, Mr. Sanjay Seth, is very optimistic of the collaboration; this is the first for the region, and is in trend with a global move toward online trading (Staff Reporter, 2006).

In an earlier strategic alliance this year, Dubai's Department of Economic Development (DED) entered into an agreement with Tejari. Accordingly, companies registered with DED will be able to offer their products and services online at Tejari's portal. Under the agreement, more than 50,000 Dubai-based organizations get access to the online service called Tejari LINK. The service is scheduled to be launched sometime in the middle of 2006. Once totally functional, the portal will work as an online directory of

Figure 1.



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