

Provision of Product Support through Enterprise Portals

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INTRODUCTION

Many enterprises make extensive use of the Internet, both for promoting their profile with the general public and for conducting aspects of their business operations.

We have identified the following uses that enterprises have for their public-facing portals, those portals that are available to any user of the Internet:

- public corporate information
- product information
- customer service
- selling

We refer to these portals with the term “public enterprise information portals.”

In addition, enterprises have portals that are not publicly available through their company intranet or as extranets. These portals provide members of the enterprise with information, applications, and services that are needed to fulfil their roles (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2001). We refer to these portals as “internal enterprise information portals.” This article does not address the role of publicly available information portals and search engines, such as Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>) and Google (<http://www.google.com>).

The references to uniform resource locators (URL) in this article indicate examples of enterprise portals exhibiting the characteristics described in the text. The URLs were all referenced in May 2006.

PUBLIC ENTERPRISE INFORMATION PORTALS

Most companies do not use the term “portal” to refer to their Internet World Wide Web sites. They tend to use the term “home page” (BHP Billiton, 2006a) or “Web site” (Westpac, 2006a, notes on bottom of page). These portals provide a single gateway to consolidated information that “consolidate, manage, analyze and distribute information across and outside of an enterprise” (Karim & Masrek, 2005).

Large enterprises tend to use their Internet “home pages” for one or more of the following:

- corporate information;
- product information;

- customer service; and
- marketing and selling.

This article focuses on the first two of these uses.

CORPORATE INFORMATION

Information portals are a means of providing information about the corporation, similar to the function served by glossy brochures (Coles Myer, 2006; O’Leary, 2002). The types of information provided by these sites include:

- **Contact Information:** Addresses and phone numbers of major contact public points in the corporation (BHP Billiton, 2006b)
- **Company Overview and Charter:** Information about the enterprise and its objectives (Tenix, 2006)
- **Annual Reports:** Often in downloadable form, such as portable document format (PDF) (Hewlett Packard, 2006a)
- **Corporate Governance** (BHP Billiton, 2006c; Hewlett Packard, 2006b):
 - corporate constitution;
 - memorandum and articles;
 - governance statements;
 - corporate board membership/board committees;
 - core corporate policies.
- **Investment Information** (3M, 2006a):
 - news;
 - presentations;
 - reports; and
 - shareholder and financial information.
- **News Releases and Presentations** (Palm, 2006a)
- **Marketing and Product Information** (3M, 2006b)
- **Environmental and Safety Information** (Palm, 2006b)
- **Human Resource and Recruitment Information** (Shell, 2006a)

PRODUCT INFORMATION

Product information portals have more to do with marketing than, directly, with selling. These portals expose the enterprise’s products to the marketplace and provide:

- promotional material;
- product specifications;
- information about product availability; and
- information about loyalty programs.

Some corporations give primary place to product promotion on their Internet portals. The purpose of such sites is not to sell products directly, but to encourage sales through other outlets. A global food manufacturer has promotional sites in several regions (Kellogg, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). There are others examples of such global/regional promotion (Palm, 2006c, 2006d).

Promotional portals do not seek to sell their products directly to avoid channel conflict with resellers (Caisse, 1998; Faletta 2001; Zarley 2002). Any sales from such sites are limited to promotional materials (Kellogg, 2006d). Rather, they seek to direct sales through normal retail channels (Palm, 2006d; IBM, 2006). However, this is not universally the case, with some companies offering online sales in addition to other outlets (Hewlett Packard, 2006d).

An aspect of promotion is to provide technical specifications of products. Product specifications are understandably common for high-tech gadgets (Hewlett Packard, 2006c; Palm 2006e), but they are sometimes also provided for lower-tech products, such as food (Kellogg, 2006e).

An important aspect of marketing is the development of customer loyalty. Some product portals have such facilities (O'Leary, 2002). Some portals promote their companies' loyalty and reward programs (For example, the portal of Coles (Coles, 2006a), a large supermarket chain in Australia, has a link to their FlyBuys loyalty program (FlyBuys, 2006)). Other programs are more directly associated with the enterprise's marketing effort; commonly, it seems, in the baby product area (Coles, 2006b; Johnson & Johnson, 2006; Kimberly-Clark, 2006; Procter & Gamble, 2006). Travel portals are examples of sites that promote loyalty by providing facilities for individual customers, such as records of past bookings (LastMinute, 2006; Orbitz, 2006.).

INTERNAL ENTERPRISE INFORMATION PORTALS

Internal enterprise information portals range widely in scope.

- The simplest of these portals, which we refer to as "intranets," are a network of World Wide Web pages hosted on Web servers connected to the enterprise internal network or intranet.
- At the other end of the spectrum are integrated systems that provide people with a unified view of information

drawn from diverse sources within and outside the enterprise. These systems have facilities not only to search for information, but also to work collaboratively across enterprise organisational boundaries. In terms of the present discussion, we reserve the term "portal" for these types of system.

The defining characteristic of internal enterprise information portals is that their audience is members of the enterprise. Access is restricted to these people by virtue of the portals' connection to the enterprises' internal network. In cases where the network is accessible to the wider Internet, internal information is protected by requiring people to log in.

The earliest definition of enterprise information portals was published in a report published by the consulting firm Merrill Lynch in 1988:

Enterprise information portals are applications that enable companies to unlock internally and externally stored information, and provide users a single gateway to personalized information needed to make informed business decision. (Shilakes & Tylman, 1988)

Other authors have been significantly influenced by this definition (White, 2000). Information portals can be described by a number of other terms, almost interchangeably: employee portals, business-to-employee systems, enterprise intranet portals, corporate portals (Benbya, Passiante, & Belbaly, 2004).

ENTERPRISE INTRANETS

The simplest form of "portal" is a collection of Web pages linked to a "home" page by hypertext links. The pages may be "static," meaning that they present the same information to all viewers and do not draw on data from outside the Web page itself. Other pages may have dynamic elements in that they incorporate style sheets, templates, and simple databases.

Intranets may incorporate an indexing and searching facility to help members of the enterprise find information. Pages in the intranet provide a window to the search engine where people can type criteria for their searches. Searches can be formulated in free-text or in Boolean format.

An authentication system may be included to control access to the intranet or to parts of it. Authentication may be linked to an enterprise-wide network system that gives a single log-in to users.

Enterprise intranets can also be readily departmentalised. Each department in an enterprise can construct its own "home" page. The various home pages can then be linked to the main enterprise home page to give the appearance of

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