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Business

Firm provides instant audio to enhance Web sites

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Correspondent

Although Internet stocks don't have the same appeal they possessed just three short years ago, electronic commerce, also known as e-commerce, is thriving on the World Wide Web.

With just a home computer and access to the Internet, consumers now can purchase products, comparison shop and even sell their unwanted junk on online auction sites without having to leave their homes.

"I was talking to a Honda dealer just the other day," said Lawrence Norber, president of Information Technologies Marketing (IMT), 200 S. Hanley Road, in Clayton.

"He said that Honda told him that 80 percent of people that buy Hondas use the Internet to shop and compare before they purchase. That's a huge number."

As more and more potential customers learn to navigate the Information Superhighway, it has become a necessity for even the smallest businesses to have its own up-to-date Web site or home page.

One essential element that many of these sites lack, however, is reliable audio. Depending on a customer's Internet connection, it can take up to several minutes to download a single audio clip.

With that in mind, IMT developed AudioVu, a Web-based product that delivers audio messages instantly to Web-surfing consumers.

"When a Web page is accessed, the audio that we provide streams immediately," Norber said. "There are no gaps, no downtime, no loading.

The audio plays immediately.

"That's all we have to do with our customers' Web sites. We don't build text; we don't build graphics. We don't edit sites. We supplement what they've got right here with audio," he said.

Although IMT had the idea for this product nearly five years ago, the technology was not available to provide instantaneous streaming audio to the large number of Internet users who use dial-up services instead of dedicated connections like digital subscriber lines (DSL).

"Up until a year ago, it just didn't work smoothly enough with dial-up connections. In order for us to really make a splash, in order for us to become a viable way to disseminate information, the audio had to be available to the vast majority," he said.

The formula for AudioVu came from Sold-On-Hold Communications, an "on-hold" advertising company that Norber started in Dallas back in 1985. Muzak, one of the largest providers of on-hold and in-store music, acquired the company in February 2000.

"People were calling companies to get information, and we were feeding information to them over the telephone," he said. "Now what's happening is that people are going to the Internet for information gathering and comparison."

"We create an audible 'urge to action,' depending on the goal of the site. If it's an e-commerce site, the goal is to fill up a 'shopping cart.' Or the goal could be to get someone to walk through the doors of Forshaw to look at lawn sets," he said.

IMT writes, produces and also stores the

audio content for its clients.

"We don't take up any additional space on our customers' servers," Norber said. "We have a little link called a 'Vuer.' This is a visual representation of a link back to our site, our server, if you will.

"The Vuer allows people to stop the audio, start the audio and also adjust the volume. The Vuer window is an area where we can add a bit of movement, so it does attract an eye," he said. Norber said IMT can stream marketing or advertising text in the Vuer window.

"Unless a customer tells us that they want the viewer somewhere else, it always appears toward the top of the page because it is important that the customer have control over that audio," he said.

IMT checks out the effectiveness of the Vuer by surfing the Internet using a very slow 28.8 dial-up connection and a Pentium II laptop.

"We'll go in and occasionally do quality-control checks with all of our customers to make sure that the audio streams instantly over a connection as slow as that, with as little memory and as slow a processor as that laptop has," Norber said.

Although the sales and marketing arm of IMT is located at the headquarters in Clayton, the production studios and technology center are in Dallas.

"All of my technology contacts, studio contacts and voice contacts remain in Dallas. They are some of the best in the country, so I stayed with them," he said.

For more information on the Vuer, check out the company Web site at www.AudioVu.com.



Rick Graefe photo

Lawrence Norber is president of Information Technologies Marketing (IMT) in Clayton.