



Big Planet lures technology-wary customers with Net.Commerce.

Whether they're desktop, laptop, palmtop or embedded, computing and communication technologies seem to have spread like wildfire to the most remote corners of the earth. Still, technology vendors, operating in a cutthroat market, continue to seek out technology have-nots in an effort to extend the Internet experience to a broader audience.

One corporation at the technology forefront, Big Planet, has devised an innovative way to win over consumers and business customers who are slow to adopt new technology. Instead of spending millions on advertising to lure them to its Web site, Big Planet strategically recruits a core of technology-savvy customers, who then act as representatives to coach and counsel the late adopters. "We're combining high-tech with high touch,"

explains Scott Schwerdt, Big Planet's vice president of sales and service.

"We can generate orders in realtime without additional staff, which saves us \$100,000 annually."

—Brett Wood, Director of E-Commerce, Big Planet

Application	Online store for high-tech products and services
Business Benefits	Estimated 100% ROI in 18 months; one week time-to-market; 1.2 million visitors per month; realtime order generation; \$100,000 annual savings in order processing
Software	IBM Net.Commerce IBM DB2® Universal Database™ for AIX® IBM Net.Data® IBM HACMP/6000™
Hardware	IBM RS/6000®



A range of products from multiple vendors is a main attraction of the Big Planet site.

It's about business, not just technology.



Big Planet envisions that some day everyone will shop this way.

When Big Planet first conceived this idea and received enthusiastic response from its would-be representatives, it knew competitors would catch on fast. So, seeking a quickly deployable, cost-effective and robust e-business solution that would support its unique business model, the company turned to IBM. In just one week, it launched its online store using IBM Net.Commerce, IBM Net.Data and IBM DB2 Universal Database for AIX on a pair of IBM RS/6000 servers.

“With 40,000 representatives throughout the United States and more joining daily, we expect our total customer base to continue to grow exponentially and drive revenues accordingly,” Schwerdt claims. “With these revenues and the associated cost savings, we expect to recoup our investment in the Web site within 18 months.”

Net.Commerce helps simplify the supply chain

As an exclusive provider of the Device, Connection and Destination, Big Planet offers a complete Internet experience. Along with Internet appliances and a wide variety of access plans to get connected to the Internet, Big Planet provides a place to shop for hundreds of thousands of products and services, from custom Web pages and long distance telephone service to flowers and golf clubs.

Big Planet representatives receive commissions on their own purchases as well as on the purchases of the customers they lead to Big Planet. The company also partners with affiliates—other online technology vendors that present products on Big Planet’s site at www.bigplanet.com—to expand its line of specialty merchandise. “We’re focused on providing a location to fulfill all the shopping needs of our customers,” Schwerdt explains. Apparently, this strategy is helping to boost traffic to the site. According to Brett Wood, Big Planet’s director of e-commerce, Big Planet is experiencing 1.2 million visits each month.

Big Planet’s own products come from multiple suppliers. Having launched the site with 15 suppliers, Big Planet now works with more than 80. As in any retail operation, fulfilling orders from multiple suppliers can be a logistical challenge. To optimize customer service, Big Planet wanted to automate the processes of taking customer orders from the online store, issuing purchase orders to suppliers and tracking shipments. “We were looking for a system that would allow us to communicate with all the suppliers through a simple interface,” Wood recalls. “We also wanted to enable the suppliers to verify shipments online so we could communicate that information to our customers.”

“Net.Commerce handles the order administration that would otherwise require a staff of people.”

—Brett Wood

Using the built-in DB2 database schema in the Net.Commerce package, Big Planet set up individual accounts for each of its suppliers. "Each supplier has its own product set within the database," Wood explains. Any time one of their products is ordered, the system automatically generates a purchase order and sends it to them by e-mail or through an electronic data interchange (EDI) interface." The system gives suppliers all of the shipping information, order numbers for confirmation and a username and password for an administration site. Once the suppliers have filled their orders, they come back to the Net.Commerce administration pages on the Web site, update the shipping statuses and enter the UPS tracking numbers. Big Planet customers can then view the status of their order through UPS after the order has been shipped.

"Net.Commerce handles the order administration that would otherwise require a staff of people," Wood adds. "Other online companies have an average of four full-time people entering order and shipping information, and it takes them as long as five days to generate purchase orders. We can generate orders in realtime without additional staff, which saves us \$100,000 annually."

Shorter time-to-market provides an edge

Another major success factor for Big Planet's online store was time-to-market, primarily because of the perceived short window of opportunity for competitive advantage. "When we did the initial spec-planning to determine how long we felt like it would take us to make this happen, we estimated that it would take us somewhere between two and three weeks," Schwerdt recalls. "In the end, we got everything up and running in a week."

According to Lane Stevens, vice president, systems operations and development, "The advantage of Net.Commerce was that it was preconfigured and ready to go. The ability to get the catalog pages loaded, configure the pricing and shipping information as well as set up the rules and the look-and-feel of the pages—all that expedited our development. We did rely a little on help from IBM, but, if we had tried to construct the store from the ground up, there's no way we could have achieved the time-to-market that we did."

"We were able to do this in a matter of a week because of the professional services that IBM extended to us, the robustness of Net.Commerce and DB2 and the fact that it all worked. That's the thing we liked most about this solution."

*—Scott Schwerdt, Vice President,
Sales and Service, Big Planet*



Epitomizing the Big Planet philosophy, the iPhone from InfoGear makes technology accessible and affordable. Check it out at www.bpstore.com.

Stevens notes that another factor in Big Planet's rapid time-to-market was the ability of Net.Commerce to quickly integrate with other components. "For example," he says, "a sales tax solution was readily available because Net.Commerce supports the TAXWARE system for tax calculations. The credit card solution was also there, and we didn't have to reinvent the wheel to make the credit card processing work."

High-tech foundation supports high-tech retail

Big Planet hosts the site on a redundant pair of RS/6000 H50 servers. "We selected the RS/6000 for its reliability," Stevens explains. The Net.Commerce software resides on the RS/6000 servers, as does DB2 Universal Database, which stores the catalog for the online store. In addition to serving up current product information through IBM Net.Data Web and database connectivity software, DB2 also exchanges information with Big Planet's heterogeneous mix of back-office ordering, inventory and accounting systems.

To ensure that its online store remains open for business 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, Big Planet uses IBM High Availability Cluster Multiprocessing software (HACMP/6000). HACMP enables automatic transfer of the workload to the backup server in the event of a failure on the main server.

"We had a person from IBM come in to assist us with HACMP," notes Systems Administrator John Tanner. "We found that very helpful and, even now, when we have questions, IBM support has been really quick to respond."

Wood concurs: "IBM has always understood the time-critical nature of our business. They've gone above and beyond to make things happen in shorter timeframes than we would have expected."

Schwerdt sums up the observations of the Big Planet team: "We were able to do this in a matter of one week because of the professional services that IBM extended to us, the robustness of Net.Commerce and DB2 and the fact that it all worked. That's the thing we liked most about this solution."

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