

What the Internet Means To Your Gear Business

Michael Goldstein, Editor-in-Chief

Let's face it. The Internet is still, to many of us, exciting, confusing, terrifying and frustrating by turns. The buzzwords change so fast that even the most high tech companies have a hard time keeping up. Cyberspace. Firewall. Java. E-commerce. The list goes on.

It's easy to get overwhelmed by the stories we hear about the Internet. Web sites cost a fortune, they say. Nobody makes any money on them, you'll hear. Meanwhile, everyone is telling you to get connected. But why? What's it supposed to do for you and your gear-related business?

While there are no easy answers, it's becoming more and more clear that the time is **now** for getting involved or starting to get involved with this medium. The technology is developing at rocket speeds, with innovations being announced daily. The sooner you get involved, the sooner you can begin to learn how to use the Internet to make you and your company more effective, productive and profitable. The longer you wait, the steeper your learning curve will be.

What IS the Internet?

Simply put, the Internet is a global network of computers that can communicate with one another. Its has

infinite potential, and it's expanding rapidly every day. The two most important parts of the Internet are e-mail and the World Wide Web.

I believe your model for finding your company's place, if any, on the Internet should be the cat rather than the python. A python swallows its food whole. A cat eats its dinner a few mouthfuls at a time, goes away, and comes back for more. That's the way I think most of you should be approaching the challenge of getting your company Internet-ready.

The Cat Model: Taking the First Bite

Before you take the plunge and establish your own Internet presence, it might pay to do some exploring as a visitor. You won't have to commit any more money than it takes to buy a computer with a modem and an account that gets you Internet access. The account can be a generic account through a local internet service provider (ISP) or an account with an online service such as America Online. In either case, this gets you e-mail, which is the most valuable part of the Internet today.

Being without e-mail today is like being without a fax machine. If you haven't had a customer ask you to "e-mail the files, the drawings and the photos," you

certainly will. Even if you never use another part of the Internet, integrating e-mail into your operations, because of its efficiency and cost-effectiveness, is a must today.

With e-mail, you can transfer as much material as you like, as far as you like, for the cost of a local phone call and a little time. And you're not limited to just text messages. With e-mail, you can send virtually any kind of computer file, including photos, CAD files, spreadsheets and more.

Think of all the uses this technology could have for

your business. Are there situations where field service technicians could benefit from seeing manuals or drawings immediately delivered to them by e-mail? Could your company benefit by receiving pictures of a broken gear—taken with one of these new digital cameras—from a field engineer in a customer's plant?

A World of Information

But e-mail is just the beginning. The World Wide Web is the next step. A network of Web sites on the bigger Internet, the World Wide Web is a great tool for

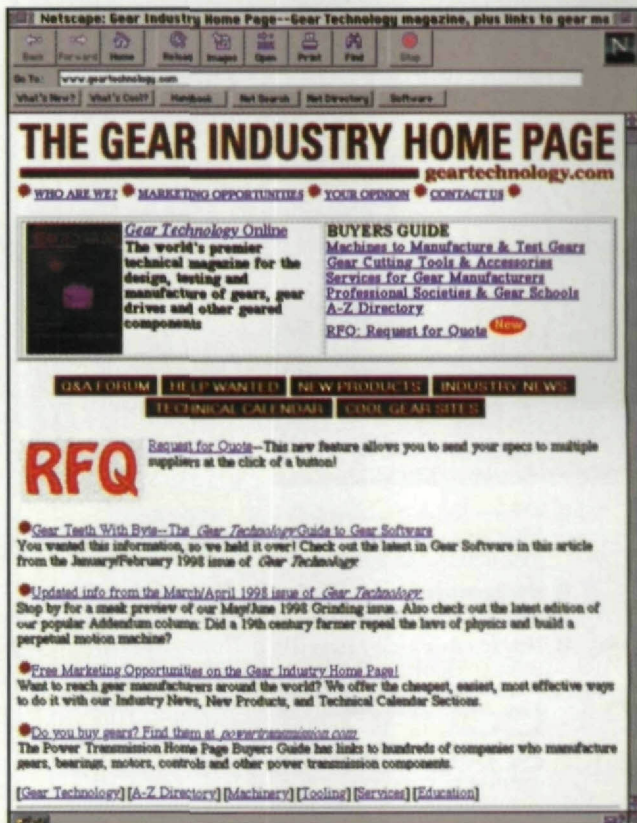


Fig. 1 — Most Web pages are filled with *hyperlinks* to other pages.

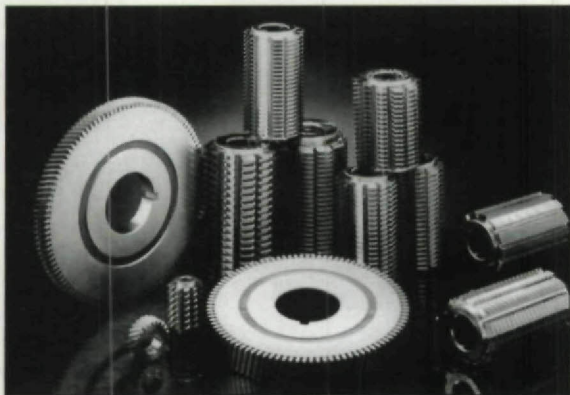
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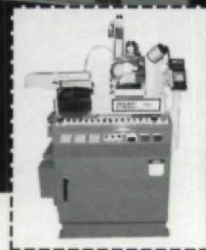
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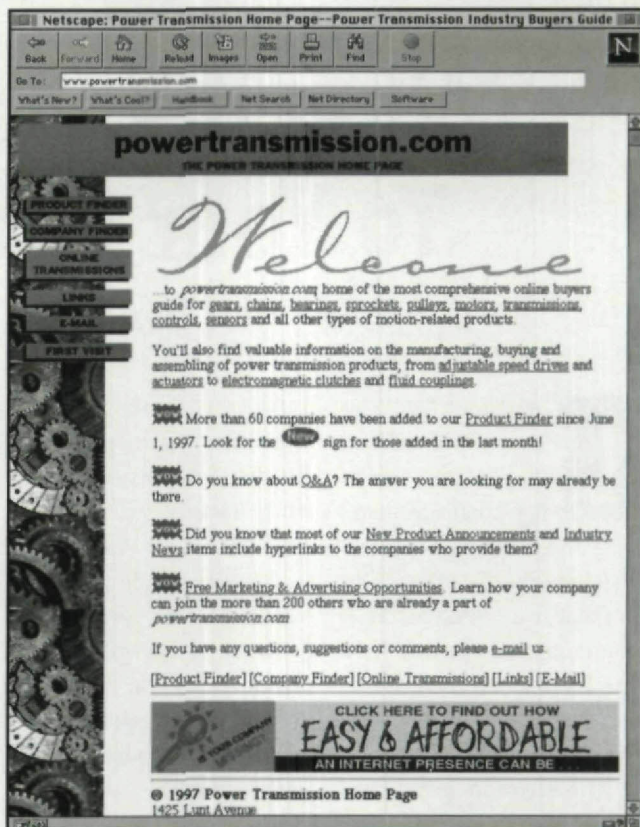


Fig. 2 — Clicking on "Product Finder" takes you to the buyers guide.

finding information. Anyone who's unfamiliar with it should spend some time just seeing what's out there and finding out how the Internet works. You may be amazed at the amount and variety of material that's already available—even on a subject as limited in scope as gear manufacturing. As you search, you'll find Web sites belonging to individuals, businesses, churches, libraries, schools, government agencies, museums, clubs, and anyone else you can think of—even a lot of your competitors.

Each Web site contains all sorts of information that the owner hopes will be of interest to at least part of the Internet audience. A Web site can contain sound, graphics, schedules, stock lists, novels, jokes, pictures, inventory, places to leave messages, songs, late-breaking news, anything the site developer can imagine.

Each of these Web sites is connected to other Web sites through a little piece of programming called a hyperlink, which is usually hidden behind one or two words on your computer screen or behind a button or graphic image. Clicking on these hyperlinks transports you instantly to another site on the Internet.

A hyperlink lets you follow your nose in researching an idea without being bound by rigid, linear thought patterns or by the limits of geography. It lets you click on the picture of *Gear Technology* to be transported right to *GT's* online version (Fig. 1). By clicking on the words "Machines to Manufacture & Test Gears," you bring up the page that helps you find new gear-making equipment.

Similarly, clicking on the button labeled "PRODUCT FINDER" (Fig. 2) will take

you to the *powertransmission.com* page with buyers guide listings of types of power transmission components. Clicking on the word "gears" will take you directly to the page that will help you find manufacturers of different types of gears. Each page links to several others. Sometimes the page you link to links back to the previous one. Sometimes it takes you off in an entirely different direction.

But all this variety and interconnectivity on the Internet creates a problem. How do you start to find the information you need? The Internet has been described as a giant library where all the books have been pulled off the shelves and dumped on the floor. The solution to all this clutter is a kind of mega-index called the search engine.

The search engine helps you sort through the mess to find what you're looking for by providing a list of hyperlinks based on the criteria you provide. There are several engines on the Web, and they all work more or less the same—though the results for individual searches will vary widely depending on the engine you use. Excite!, AltaVista and Lycos are three of the major ones. Yahoo, one of the biggest Internet directories, allows you to perform searches on its categories or submit a search to one of the engines.

But even with a search engine, you may find that you have thousands of potential sites to go through before finding one you want to visit. Recently we typed "spiral bevel gears" into the Alta Vista search engine and

were shocked to find more than 19,000 hyperlinks to Web sites that supposedly relate to this topic (Fig. 3).

Most of you don't have time to look at 19,000 Web pages to find a supplier. But fortunately, as you explore, you're likely to find more focused information sources as well. For example, the first listing that appeared when I typed in "spiral bevel gears" was a link to the *powertransmission.com* page with more than 75 of the top spiral bevel gear manufacturers and hyperlinks to their Web pages (Fig. 4).

The Power Transmission Home Page™ is just one example of industrial resources on the Web. Most professional organizations (such as AGMA, SME and ASME) and research centers also have Web sites devoted to the topic of their interest.

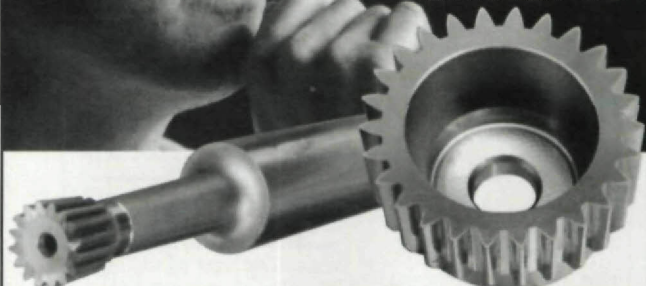
The Next Bite:

Taking the Plunge

Up to this point, we have been discussing the Internet from the point of view of a visitor, someone just looking around, using the Internet for research or entertainment. But the question remains: What does all this have to do with my gear business? Is having my own Web site worth the hassle or is it a giant techno-pig in a poke?

As you explore the Internet and get comfortable with it as a user, you'll also begin to see the value of establishing a presence of your own. You'll begin to see how you might be able to use tools like the search engines and directories to harness the power of the hyperlink and bring potential customers to your electronic door.

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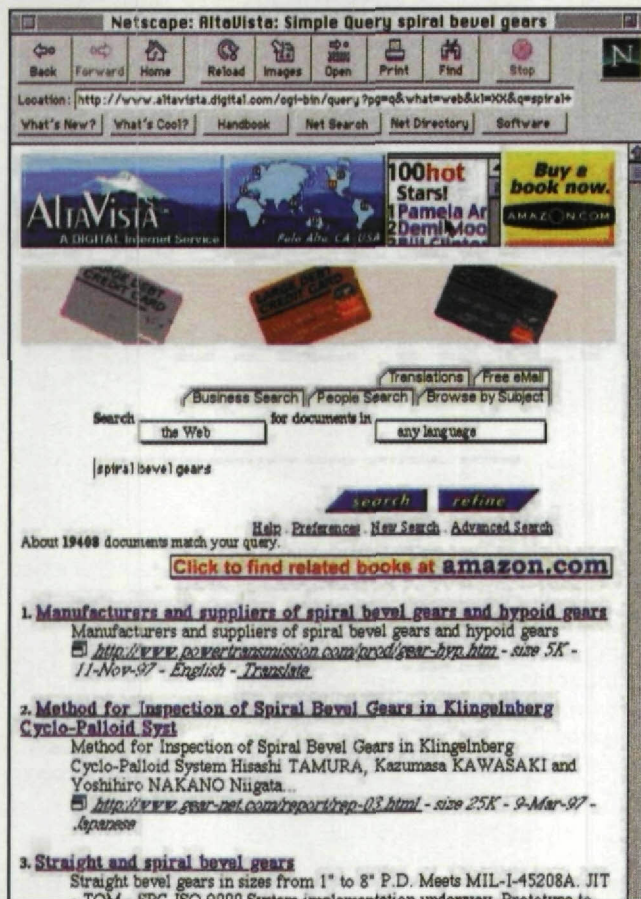


Fig. 3 — Typing "spiral bevel gears" into a search engine reveals 19,000 listings.



Fig. 4 — Directories provide a more focused alternative.

One of the main reasons for having your own Internet presence is that you can make available all sorts of information about your company and its products and services, including

- Your product literature (including descriptions in words and pictures).
- New products.
- Information on a new service you've just started.
- Photos of your shop.
- The new gear machines you just purchased.
- Open manufacturing time.
- Your distributor list.
- Your employee directory.
- Your plant locations.
- Your business hours.
- Anything else you think your customers or potential customers might want to know about your business.

What's more, this information becomes available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and it's accessible from anywhere on the globe.

Another benefit of your own Internet presence is that it can help project a corporate image. The shop with 10-20 people and the latest equipment can differentiate itself from a larger shop with good, older equipment set up for longer runs.

The amount of information and services that can be accessed through your Web site, its design and its ease of use all contribute to the impression you give to current and potential customers. Looking like the leader in your field always makes it easier to become the leader.

Learn Today While It's Still Manageable

A modest Internet presence now is a great learning lab. It

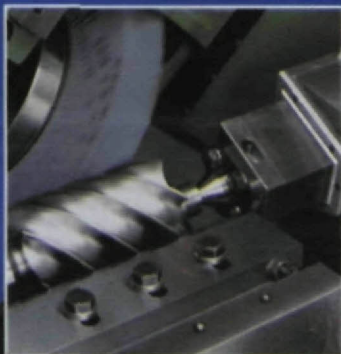
gives you a chance to experiment, a chance to learn what works and what doesn't and a chance to clarify your message.

This is part of the philosophy behind the way we set up *The Gear Industry Home Page™* and *The Power Transmission Home Page™*. We wanted to make it as easy as possible for the companies in our industry (both the suppliers to gear manufacturers on *geartechnology.com* and the gear manufacturers themselves on *powertransmission.com*) to get involved with the Internet in order for them to inexpensively see its marketing and sales potential. By giving our pages away for free for six months and not charging our advertisers extra for any changes to their pages, a company with no Internet experience can get online, tinker with its message and see what works and what doesn't.

For example, if your company is not getting the responses you hoped for, if the "wrong" people are contacting you, maybe it's because your message isn't clear. If you keep getting queries for products or services you don't provide, ask yourself what makes people think you do provide them. What in your message gives them that idea? It may not be the Internet that's the problem, but your message.

One of the beauties of a Web site is that it's cheap and easy to tinker with your message or even tailor-make it to a particular audience.

Another value of the Internet is that it allows your message to reach potential customers you don't even know about. Customers looking for suppliers of



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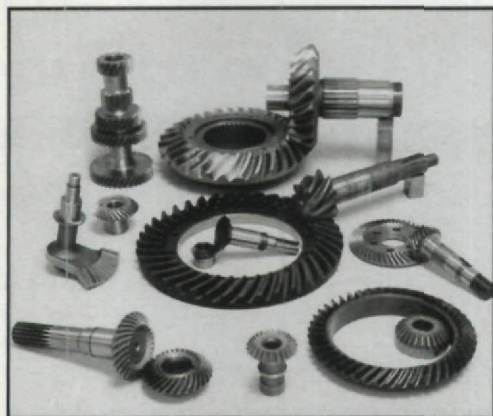
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products and services are turning to the Internet to find what they need. If you're not there, they can't find you.

The Next Bite:

Marketing

Unlike the ball diamond in *Field of Dreams*, just building a Web site doesn't mean that people will come to it—at least not necessarily the people you want—potential customers. Marketing your presence on the Internet becomes your next mission.

Some of the obvious ways of getting the word out are putting your Web address in your advertising and brochures, on your business cards and your company letterhead—in short, anywhere your company name appears.

But perhaps the best way to get traffic to your Web site is to get other Web sites to hyperlink to yours. Registering your Web site with the search engines is one of the best ways to start. By doing this, you tell the search engine to catalog your page and all the words on it so that when a visitor types in "spiral bevel gears," your page is among the 19,000.

Another popular and effective way to help direct people to your Web site is through the use of some of the industry-specific Internet directories mentioned earlier. By being among the 75 companies listed on *powertransmission.com* as well as the 19,000 listed by the search engine, you greatly increase your chances of being found. People might not know your company exists. But they might be looking for the products you manufacture or the services you provide.

The directories usually do more than just provide hyper-

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links. They often do a lot of the marketing work for you. They register with the search engines, advertise and exhibit at trade shows. They also provide content, including feature articles, industry news and calendars of events, intended to attract visitors.

In the beginning, it may be to your advantage to get yourself listed in a number of relevant directories. The more hyperlinks you have, the more powerful your Web site becomes, because not everyone is going to look for you in the same place or in the same way. Some hyperlinks will prove to be more useful than others. As you begin to track the effectiveness of each one in bringing you the right kind of Web site visitors, you can rethink which ones you want to continue to use.

The cost for listings or pages in commercial directories can be anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand dollars a year. The amount, however, is not necessarily a good indicator of

their effectiveness. Unfortunately, you won't know which directories are best until you experiment a bit. The fees are just part of the cost of learning to market your company on the Internet.

So Is the Internet Hype or Reality?

While there is still a lot of hype about the Internet and the uncertainty about the role it will play in the future, some things about it are becoming clear:

- The Internet is here to stay. It's not going away. It's not the 8-track tape deck of the 90s. You will have to take it into account in your business plans for the coming decades.

- E-mail alone is worth the price of admission. E-mail is the next fax machine. You don't need to wait to find out if this is good idea. It is!

- If you don't have a Web site already, you should start making plans to integrate the Internet into your future marketing strategy. If you haven't even thought of getting online yet, you are already falling behind.

- Start the learning curve today while it's still early. Give your employees the tools to learn how to begin using this new medium to market your company and to use it as a tool to find what you need.

- Remember that the Internet is fast becoming the method of choice by which more and more young people get their information, and it will figure in the way they conduct business, possibly even your business. These people already use the technology and have integrated it into the way they do research

and communicate. They will be the decision makers, the managers and business owners who will be your customers, employees and competitors in a few short years.

Ignoring the Internet is not going to make it go away. True, you can probably do business just as you have in the past—that is, without the Internet—quite well for the next few years. But sooner or later, you're going to have to be part of the Internet revolution or be left behind. Better to develop your expertise like a cat—in small bites that leave you time and money for the rest of your business—rather than like a python, having to digest a lump of technology whole while running as fast as you can to catch up with everybody else.

The information in this article was extracted from a speech originally presented at the AGMA annual meeting held in March 1998 in Puerto Rico.

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