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Application Syndication: Delivering Value to Your Customers (Instead of the Other Way Around)

Robust Brand-in-Brand™ experiences – enabled by Web services – will change the way companies reach customers online.

April 2001

If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain.

Sounds like the typical Web user experience: If you want content, you have to go where the content is.

Wouldn't it be nice if it worked the other way around, and the content came to where you were – say, to the contextually relevant site you were visiting?

With Web services – new technologies and standards that connect the participants in a business web – that idea is not only nice, it's possible.

The right place at the right time

Think of the current model for reaching an online audience today: Build a website, then run ads on other sites trying to convince users to come to your site. It's counterintuitive – and as sub-.5% clickthrough rates attest, it's not working. Even in b-to-b situations, one generally expects the other party to do the traveling.

Now, imagine the Web services-enabled, application syndication version of this story:
- You create content and functionality of value to your target audience (customers, business allies, internal constituents, whomever).
- Utilizing Web services, you distribute this application to strategically chosen partner sites that aggregate your audience and provide the desired context.

- Your audience interacts with the actual application on the partner site – not just with a banner ad for it.

For example …

Imagine you're a financial services institution, and a key part of your value proposition is your ability to help a customer create the right portfolio for an investment objective. You probably have an assessment tool – *Time horizon? Risk tolerance? Percentage of total assets you're investing?* – that you run prospective customers through to help them understand how you work, what you offer, and how you can be of help to them. Now, let's assume your audience tends to visit Yahoo! Finance. Which would you rather do?
- Run a robust, branded version of your portfolio assessment tool right on Yahoo! Finance.
- Run a banner ad on Yahoo! Finance begging users to click it and visit your site.

For most companies, the choice is clear.

And more examples

It isn't difficult to come up with examples: A Polo Ralph Lauren boutique inside Macys.com. An Expedia travel planner inside a business community. Nike "shoe builder" applications on thousands of affiliate sites.

Other models exist too. You could private label certain functionality and distribute it to partners or even competitors, if that fit with

your strategy. So on some sites the aforementioned portfolio balancer would be branded, on other sites, you would make available a version that your partner would put its signature on.

You could even syndicate pure functionality – meaning, a behind-the-scenes business process is made available to partners, even though no user interface at all is visible. Your process simply feeds another process – think of it as one program talking to another. The results of this process, however, could be branded when presented to the user.

How is it possible?

Nothing we're describing was impossible to achieve before; but doing so would have required tremendous effort. Each partner site integration would have been a one-off attempt to harmonize incompatible platforms, applications and data structures.

It's the recent – and unprecedented – industry-wide adoption of new XML-based Web services standards such as

SOAP, UDDI and WSDL that have provided the foundation for
Internet-based component interfacing. It doesn't matter what language your software is written in, what hardware it runs on, or where the network resides.

However, it should also be noted that application syndication and Web services in general are not a panacea. You still need an understanding of your audience, a strategy for reaching them, and the creative and technical muscle to build a compelling application for them to interact with.

A new paradigm: success

Let's not underestimate the potential of Web services to radically change the way businesses present themselves online. If

digital branding is all about embodying your company's core value proposition in a useful, engaging utility – and if savvy (and jaded) Web surfers are increasingly unlikely to interrupt their clickflow and be distracted by an ad banner – what better way to get their attention than to present them with something of real value at the point of greatest contextual relevance? The contrast between the old paradigm and the new is so clear that it seems inevitable Web services will dramatically alter existing assumptions, practices, and revenue models.

The mountain is coming to Mohammed. Don't be surprised how fast it gets here.

Primordial is an IT consultancy that helps organizations conceive, create and deploy Web services to improve processes, open new markets and extend operations.